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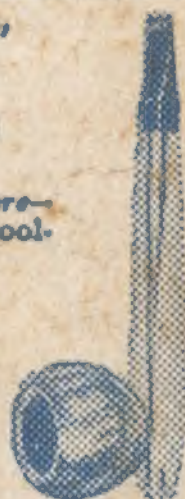
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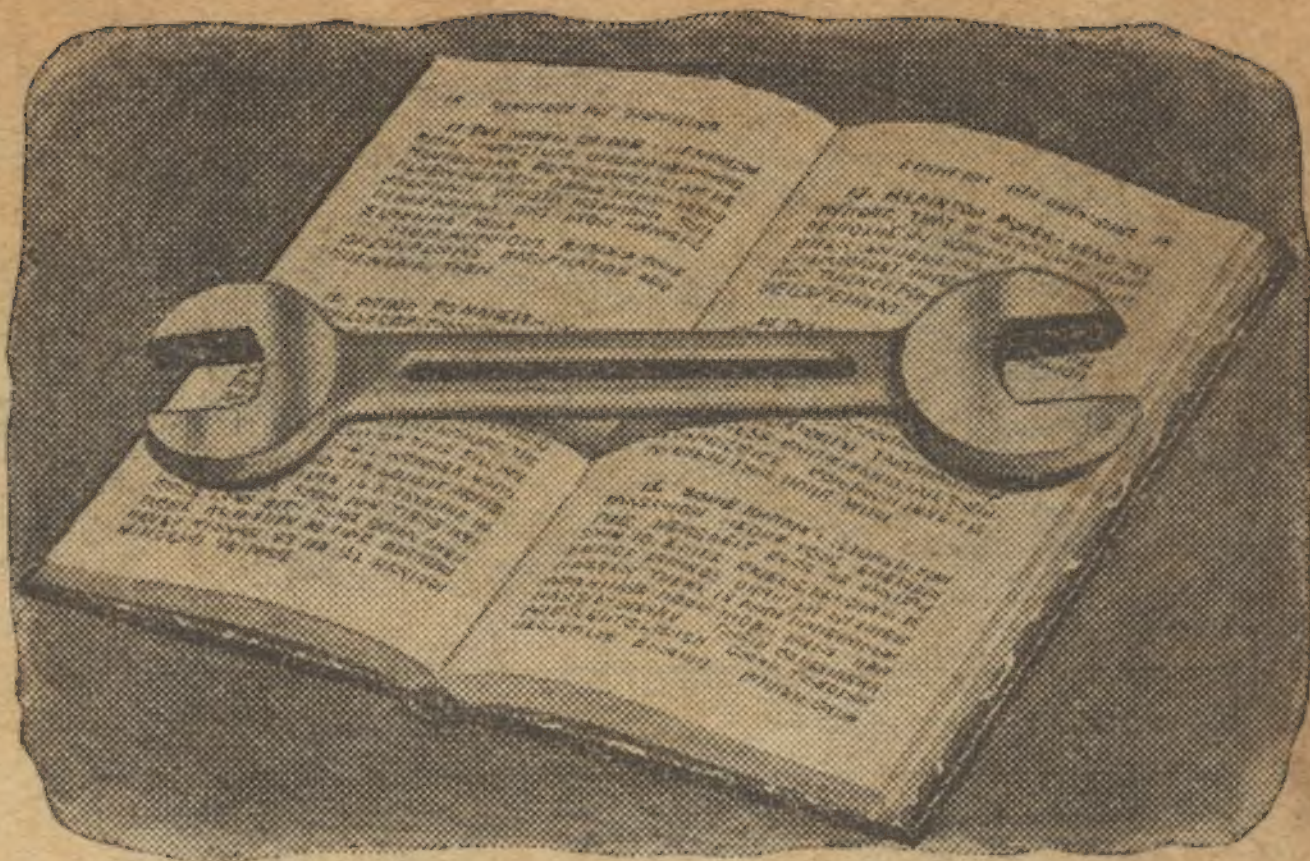
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Volume 11

December 1948

Number 2



Complete Book-Length Novel

(First Magazine Publication)

THE BRAND BLOTTER

By Chuck Stanley 6

Walt Grady knew that hidden forces were working to divide the range, while pretending to assist in building it up. But Grady didn't know where to look for the foe!

SHORT STORY

GUNMAN'S YULETIDE NEMESIS by Charles D. Richardson, Jr. 80

Ed Chime could only show his love for his wife one way, it seemed—by dying!

FEATURES

HAIR-DOS INDIAN STYLEby L. C. Davis 88

GUN-LORD FROM LIVERPOOLby Lee Baldwin 90

A CRIPPLE CREEK LEGEND ...by Rex Whitechurch 95

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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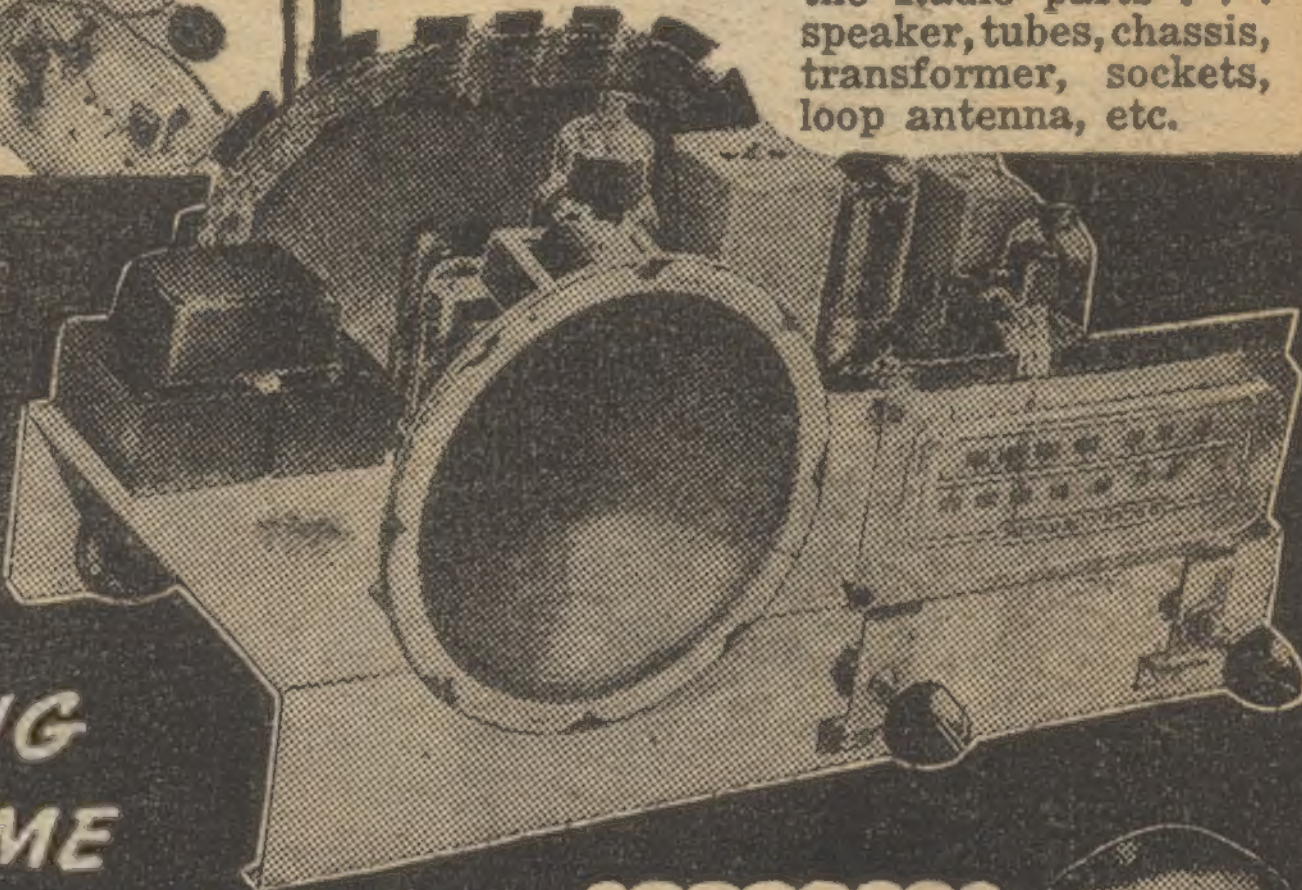


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The BRAND BLOTTER

by CHUCK STANLEY



**First Magazine Publication of This Complete,
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When Walt Grady promised to look up old Pop Farrell, he didn't suspect that he'd find himself plunged into a deadly conflict, where hidden forces directed lawless bands while pretending to assist in building up the country!



§ 1 §

THE FRONTIER town of Hiawatha, Kansas, was bustling with activity. Eighty wagons had crossed the Missouri River at St. Joseph two nights before and were now encamped at the prairie outpost. The leader of the train, "Oregon" Jackson, was deep in discussion with young Walt Grady.

"Folks don't always realize just how lonesome the Oregon Trail can be," Jackson declared. "No matter



how sociable you may be when you leave Saint Joe, a group of pioneers can get plumb sick and tired of each other after two thousand miles on the trail."

"I reckon you're right," Grady agreed. "And I think there's another thing you should remember. Lots of folks who thought they had everything aboard the wagons when they left Saint Joe have discovered plenty of things they've forgotten. Stopping here gives them a chance to buy those things at the general store."

Oregon Jackson chuckled. "You've got something there," he agreed, "and don't think that old man Tucker at the store doesn't realize that. He does a land-office business with such things as needles, thread, sewing kits, old bits of iron, and other items."

Walt Grady nodded. Jackson turned to stride away and examine his charges. He would have to advise a lot of the wagon men on the importance of greasing axles, wetting spokes to keep them from drying out on the dusty prairie, and other important details of the trail driver's craft.

Grady was interested in the wagons, but he was also interested in the people who were traveling with them. Among them were about twenty fellows of his own age. While Grady wore a nondescript outfit pieced together from his Union Army uniform and an old battered Stetson hat, these fellows were more dapper in appearance. They wore new levis, cartridge-filled belts and low-slung six-guns. Their faces were covered by perpetual smiles, and they were constantly joking with each other.

Most of them were from Texas, and spoke of their work on the cow ranches down there. Walt didn't know much about this side of frontier life, so he left them to their own pursuits. He wondered what such a group of young hombres would be doing in a wagon train.

Of course the young ladies who were riding on the high seats with their mothers and fathers might have something to do with it. Frequently during the two-day journey Grady

had noticed one or the other of the cowboys cantering along close to the high wheel of a wagon, and almost burning the hide of his mount as the big wheel turned.

Now these fellows were heading for the Tucker trading post and coming back with pokes of candy destined for their girl friends.

IN THE MORNING of the fourth day out of Saint Joe the wagon train was ready to move on to the westward. Oregon Jackson gave the orders for the teams to couple up, and the drivers went to work with a will. Some of them had teams of heavily built Percherons; others were proud of their Morgan stock, which was capable of handling a team job, and later on would make good work and riding horses in the fields. Here and there were four and six-span teams of oxen.

All of the animals were sleek and well fed.

Walt Grady was busy at the rope corral, throwing his gear onto the broad back of his sorrel stallion, Ulysses. He had named the horse in honor of the tough Union Army general who had finally brought about the victory over General Lee and his Confederate forces. Ulysses had carried him through the last year of the war, and was well injured to shot and shell and most field emergencies.

Grady completed the rigging of his horse, adjusted his saddle bags and was about to stroll away with the reins in his hand when suddenly he felt a touch on his sleeve. He turned around to discover an old lady standing beside him.

"Do you believe in hunches, young man?" she asked him.

"You might say that I do, ma'am." He swept his hat off his tousled hair and stood looking at her. There was a clear sparkle in her blue eyes. Her hair was neatly arranged and was covered by a woven woolen shawl. She wore serviceable woolen garments that were obviously home-made.

"I've been watching you all day yesterday, and this morning," the old lady declared.

Up at the head of the wagons the bellowing voice of Oregon Jackson could be heard, ordering the teamsters to "Line out!"

There was the clank of metal as the traces tightened, the crack of leather whips, and the jingle of bits and rings. Then there was a cheery sound on the morning air as banjo and accordion sounded off, and a hundred voices, from heavy male bass to childish treble, filled the sky with song. The wagon train was on the move.

Grady's horse was skittish. He wanted to join the others moving out of Hiawatha toward the west, but the little old lady still held onto Walt's sleeve. "I'd like to ask you to do me a favor," the woman said, "if you'll come over to my porch for a moment. You can catch up to the train all right. That horse of yours looks like a real Pegasus."

GRADY NODDED his willingness and paced the woman toward her humble cottage. He dropped the reins in the dust and Ulysses stood still. Then he seated himself on the low porch while the woman settled in her rocking chair.

"I'm Aunt Emily Farrell," she announced. "I've heard the boys calling you Walt. What's the other name?"

"Walt Grady, ma'am. It's a pleasure to know you. Now what's the favor?"

"I don't know much about how these wagon trains move westward, so I'm asking you this in confidence. If it'll inconvenience you at all, then we can forget about it, and I'll make other arrangements. Do you happen to be traveling anywhere near the Arapahoe Gorge of the Republican River?"

In company with the other men of the train, Walt Grady had discussed the route with Oregon Jackson, and knew that they would be heading toward the North Platte River and Fort Kearney. This was not only the easiest route for wagons, but also made it possible for them to receive help from the cavalry squadrons stationed at the various posts across Nebraska

and Wyoming.

"The wagon train is going up the North Platte River," he explained to her, "so I don't think we'll be anywhere near the Arapahoe Gorge on the Republican. According to present plans the train will follow the Republican River only as far as Red Cloud; then we head north and west toward Kearney."

A look of disappointment crossed the features of the woman, and her hands started to fold over the sewing on which she was working.

"What's going on in the Arapahoe Gorge of the Republican River?" Walt asked pleasantly.

"My brother is running a ferry out there. He is much younger than I am, but is still quite along in years. He fancies himself as a tough-hided old pioneer and maybe he is. But my niece didn't think it was right for her father to be out there all alone in the wild Indian country, so she went out to stay with him. I haven't heard from them for several months. I'm wondering whether they are all right. I'd like to send them a letter telling them how things are in Hiawatha, and perhaps they'll write back to me."

"I'm sure they're making out all right," Walt assured her, "but if it will make you happy, I'll be glad to take the message for you. Ulysses won't mind making a detour to help you out, and we can light out across country between the Republican and the North Platte and catch up with the wagon train somewhere near North Platte or Oshkosh."

"That's splendid," the woman declared. "I know you'll have good luck, thanks to your unselfishness in conforming with an old woman's whims. And I'll feel much better about those two out there. You understand, don't you?"

Walt assured her that he did understand, and Aunt Emily Farrell left her chair and hurried inside to get him the letter she had written to her brother. She also offered him a flask of home-made cider, saying:

"You'll probably find my brother a crotchety old fellow, but you ought to like his daughter Daisy."

"I'm sure I will," Walt declared. He turned to gather up the reins of his horse, and swung them around the neck of the sorrel. As he straightened up the woman planted a kiss on his cheek and said simply: "God bless you!"

A tear gathered in the corner of her eye; then Walt was in the saddle. He waved a salute to Aunt Emily Farrell and cantered off down the road that led out of town to the west.

When he was around the first bend he slowed his horse and looked back over his shoulder. The log cabin was still visible, and apparently the old lady was still standing there on the porch. Walt waved again, then resumed his journey.

2



HE journey overland from Hiawatha to Red Cloud was about one hundred and eighty miles. It was through a country that was fairly level prairie, but now and then creeks over their banks, swampy ground and other natural haz-

ards would make it necessary for the wagon train to detour for some miles.

Here and there parties of the young men led by Oregon Jackson, with Walt Grady and Tex Cronin in the van, would go out to hunt for game to provide fresh meat for the travelers. Some of them were carrying chickens in coops and they had their cattle herd, but they did not want to use these on the trail if they could avoid it.

The names of the settlements along the north bank of the Republican River constantly reminded the pioneers that they were in Indian country; they had crossed the Big Blue at Marysville and picked up the larger stream at Concordia. From there it was only about sixty miles to Red Cloud.

The farther away they went from Saint Joe and Hiawatha, the more

unified the group became. A bond was forged and strengthened between Grady and the cowboys, and even those who had fought against the Yankees liked to listen to the stories Walt could tell about the action in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

One afternoon as they were riding along, hazing the cattle ahead of them, Grady asked: "What are you fellows going to do when you get to Oregon, Tex?"

Cronin looked at him in some surprise. "We're not sure that we're going through to Oregon, Walt. We're the pioneers of another great movement in the West, or at least we like to think so. We came up here to look over the rangeland for cattle grazing."

"Cattle grazing? But there are very few cattle in Kansas and Nebraska."

"That's right," Cronin admitted, "but there are literally millions of them in Texas. They've been growing and reproducing there all during the Civil War and they haven't been under any restriction. The days when cattle were killed for hides and tallow are going in Texas. Now there are some far-sighted cattle grazers who realize that there is a market in the big cities of the North and East for beef cattle. Large slaughterhouses are already in Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago."

"I know that," Walt Grady replied. "But I still don't see what you're driving at."

"Simple enough," Tex Cronin pointed out. "If the cattle are on the plains of Texas and the slaughterhouses are in Missouri and Illinois, we've got to get the two of them together. Some of the cattle go by boat to New Orleans, but Texas is a big place. If a waddy is raising cows up along the Red River or in the Panhandle, he's a heap sight closer to St. Louis overland than he would be going to the Gulf and around the seaway to New Orleans. Trail herding is going to be the shipping method of the immediate future."

"Trail herding?" Grady's voice expressed a mixture of surprise and cu-

riosity. "All the way to St. Louis and Chicago?"

"Not exactly," Tex replied. "Only to the railroad lines. With the U.P. and the K.P. moving westward, Texans can round up their cattle down in the Lone Star State and drive them northward to Kansas towns on the railroad. Sooner or later there'll be a railroad heading southward, but in the meantime we've got to come to them."

"But that will mean driving right through the Indian Territory," Walt pointed out.

"It's risky, I'll admit," Cronin agreed, "but then the Indians are not going to have everything their own way. Some of them can be talked to, and they'll make things easier for us."

WALT GRADY could appreciate this angle of the trail herding operation, but he still did not understand Tex Cronin's reference to trail herding to Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming.

"I still don't see what you're aiming at up here," he finally declared.

"It's easy," Tex Cronin told him. "Now it stands to reason that the packers are going to be glad to take most of the cattle that come up the trail. And they'll pay good prices for them. But when thousands and thousands of cattle come up the Texas trail, the market price will go down, and the cattle are bound to lose weight from the trip. So my pards and I are figuring on starting feeder ranches in Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming."

"Feeder ranches?" Walt whistled; he saw the possibilities almost at once. "Sure thing. You can take the Texas herds and put on plenty of good pounds of meat. You can have your ranches close to the new railroad and the shipping problem will be solved for you. Tex, you've got something."

"Glad you think so," Tex declared. "Would you like to throw in with us?"

"It sounds like a swell idea," Grady declared, "but I have another chore to attend to before I can think of that."

Cronin winked, then asked: "Something to do with the old lady in Hiawatha?"

"You've guessed it," Walt Grady told him. "I'm supposed to look up her brother and her niece somewhere out in the Indian country. Wish me luck."

"A niece, hey?" Cronin chuckled. "Is she good-looking?"

"I have no idea," Walt replied, but a flush came to his cheeks and the other cowboy laughed.

The conversation shifted to other subjects then and the train moved along toward Red Cloud.

They were going to make rather a prolonged stop at Red Cloud. For one thing, Oregon Jackson was anxious to check over the equipment to make sure that it was standing up under the pounding of the trail. He also wanted to give the women and young folks more time to stretch their legs and become accustomed to the wilderness in which they were traveling.

Youngsters talked over their plans for fishing or hunting while the wagon train was in camp. Scouts spoke of checking the area between the Republican and the North Platte for roving bands of Indians. But no one took this prospect too seriously, for they knew that with the ending of the Civil War and the assignment of more troops to the frontier, the Indians had generally moved farther west and north toward the Yellowstone and the Canadian border.

JACKSON CAME to see Walt Grady at the herd when they went into camp at Red Cloud. He put one hand on the shoulder of the tall young frontiersman and said: "I hear you're leaving us here. Anything wrong?"

"Not at all," Grady assured him. "It's just a personal matter I have to attend to. When it's all washed up, I figure to rejoin the wagon train. I'm hoping to be able to catch up with you at North Platte, or maybe Oshkosh. If necessary I'll chase you all the way to Laramie."

"Glad to hear that," Jackson declared. "I've taken quite a liking for you, son. And I figure from the

things I've heard along the way that we're likely to need your brains and your guns when we get west of Laramie."

"Is it that serious?" Grady asked with interest.

"Sure thing," Oregon Jackson assured him. "They claim that Chief Gall, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Rain-in-the-Face and some of the others are acting up. But I reckon Phil Sheridan, George Custer and the boys will be able to handle them. Good luck to you, Walt. We'll be seeing you."

Jackson turned on his heel and walked off down the wagon line.

Early on the morning of the second day after their arrival at Red Cloud, Walt Grady geared his sorrel, looked over his pack and gear and then went around to bid good-bye to his friends. They waved to him as he pointed Ulysses along the north bank of the Republican and galloped away.

Walt had met a number of trappers and frontiersmen in the settlement at Red Cloud as well as a group of riverboatmen who journeyed up and down the Republican and up into such tributaries as Dog Creek, Sappa Creek and Beaver Creek. They had helped him to sketch a fairly accurate map of the territory and some of them even knew Pop Farrell and his daughter Daisy.

With this information in his possession, Walt Grady looked forward to his journey with a great deal of pleasure. He figured out that it was something like eighty miles to the Arapahoe Gorge and he hoped to be able to cover this at a leisurely pace in two or three days.

AS HE RODE westward he began wondering just what would be the advantage of a ferry at the Arapahoe Gorge on the Republican River. There were any number of fords up and down the river where people might cross if they were willing to make a detour.

Walt decided that undoubtedly this problem would be answered for him when he reached the Farrell cabin. He rode for the greater part of the day and well into the night, stopping occasionally to give his horse a rest, and to catch a trail snack.

His horse was trailing along the north rim of the gorge through which the Republican River was tumbling when darkness overtook him. Rather than risk the rocky trail at night, Grady decided to camp off the trail to the north and go on in the morning.

So he set up his camp, ate a warm meal and settled in his blankets for the night. His six-guns in their holsters were wrapped in the gun belts and laid alongside his saddle, which formed an improvised pillow.

Walt did not fall asleep immediately. The sound of the river and the music of the night insects and foraging small animals kept him awake.

Suddenly he stiffened. The sound of gunfire came to his ears. He was out of his blankets as though impelled by a strong coiled spring. The bushes over his head which formed something of a shelter told him that there was little or no wind. Sounds came clearly in the still night.

But they also proved confusing. At first he was unable to determine from which direction the gunfire might have come. Had it been back along the trail over which he had journeyed during the afternoon and evening? Or was it ahead in the direction of the ferry?

He rigged his horse with experienced fingers and quick moving hands. His gun belts were buckled about his waist and a rifle was pouched in the scabbard on the saddle. He kicked his feet into his boots, which had been set aside when he went to bed, and whipped into the kak.

Ulysses was just as anxious to get under way as his master was. The sound of gunfire excited him, just as it had in war days.

"Let's go, boy," Walt said as he struck the hull. Ulysses was already kicking sparks from the rocks beneath his irons, and was galloping down the river road. Grady went perhaps half a mile without seeing anything. Like a good strategist, he drew up his horse to make a survey of the terrain ahead of him. He knew that he would be of no help to anyone if he ran into an ambush.

Walt saw that the river widened a bit ahead of him. The moon sent silver ripples over the surface and sparkled on the rocks below. On the far side of the river there was a lighted window, and in the square of light he saw the silhouette of a girl with a shotgun in her hands.

"Sure looks like trouble," Grady decided as he nudged his horse with dull irons. Ulysses responded promptly, and covered the ground between the trail and the ferry in quick time. Now Walt was able to hear loud voices talking, and he felt some relief at this. If the men ahead were willing to palaver, then there was a chance that he might be in time.

THE FIRST words that came to his ears were anything but reassuring. He heard a cracked, harsh voice saying: "I wouldn't take you on my ferry if you were the last humans in the world. I know you've just done a meanness up the trail, and I'm not helping you to get away with it. You can gun me down if you like."

"We ain't hankering for a gun showdown with you, mister," retorted the spokesman for a trio of tough hombres who were on horseback at the edge of the river. "We want to get down to our hidcote, and we ain't looking for no trouble."

"Looks like a stalemate, Ulysses horse," Walt Grady said crisply as he reached for the rifle in his scabbard. "Maybe we can sort of turn the tables one way or another."

Grady kneed the horse forward slowly and it moved down the winding trail to the river bank. Apparently none of those taking part in the argument heard him coming. Finally one of the ruffians said: "Mister, we've been palavering long enough. I reckon we can just gun you down, and take ourselves across on your little two-bit ferry."

"If you do, hombre," came a shout from the other side of the stream, "you'd better figure out how to digest a belly full of buckshot."

Walt looked toward the lighted cabin where he had seen the silhouette of the girl some moments before. Now she was standing in the darkness, ob-

viously realizing that she made too good a target against the lighted background.

"We'll take our chances on that," the spokesman said. "Come on, boys. Let's make a run for it. Give it to the old man first!"

Walt Grady broke in at this point and said solemnly: "Hombre, you're plumb impolite. You ought to learn to be more respectful to your elders."

The speaker whirled around and looked into the leveled rifle in Walt's hands. His companions' hands darted for their guns, then hesitated as they realized that they were no longer fighting a crotchety old man and a girl separated from them by the width of the Republican River.

"Don't butt in here, cowboy," the man declared, "or you'll find yourself in a heap of trouble."

"Trouble?" laughed Grady. "That's my middle name, mister. Looks like you're rodding a heap of trouble your own self. Now if I were you and these gun-hung pardners of yours, I'd shuck my irons and do a mite more talking. What's this all about?"

The three horsemen said nothing. Neither did they make any effort to obey his command regarding their weapons. Pop Farrell, on the alert, and with his rifle at the ready, looked up at Grady and said: "I don't know where you came from, mister, but you sure arrived at the right time. I'm beholden to you."

"You're welcome, old-timer," Walt declared. "What do you know about this mix-up?"

"I don't know much that a fellow ran swear by," Farrell replied, "but I reckon I can do a heap of figuring. I came across with the ferry tonight because I'm due to pick up the stagecoach that runs between Beaver City, Kansas, and Kearny, Nebraska. It's a steady chore, and I don't like to be late with it, because them Overland boys are right proud of their records on this run. Just as I'm about to tie up to the wharf here, I hear some shooting down the road, and I quick-like figure that someone is trying to rob the stagecoach. Five minutes later these hombres come sky-hooting along and try to get aboard the ferry."

I've got a hunch that they're road agents."

Grady nodded, then turned to the spokesman for the trio and asked: "Well, did you fellows stick up the Beaver City stage?"

There was no answer. Walt realized then that these men were merely working under orders. They would not say anything for fear that retaliation from someone higher up would be quicker and more deadly than any punishment Grady or the law could mete out.

"I reckon we'll have to look into the matter," Grady decided. "But first of all we'll have to draw the stingers from these rattlesnakes."

NOW, FOR the first time, Grady saw the reason for the argument between Pop Farrell and the gunmen. The ferry was some yards from shore and apparently the water at the dock was quite deep, too deep for the men to take a chance on urging their horses into the Republican River.

"Keep your gun on these fellows until I can disarm them," Grady declared, "then tie up to the pier and we'll take them across to your place."

"Okay, mister," Pop Farrell replied. "I'll have my gun cocked and my eye steady."

As Walt began to dismount, the spokesman for the night-riding trio snarled: "You're not going to take us that easy, mister. If you're looking for a dose of lead poisoning, we're the folks who can hand it out to you."

The man in the moon seemed to chuckle as he darted behind a cloud and momentary darkness closed in about the actors in the drama at the ferry crossing. The three ruffians moved quickly, and their guns came up in a flash of blinding flame.

Pop Farrell's rifle smashed out and there was a cry of pain. Then Grady moved in and snapped the trigger of his gun, and the spokesman for the trio, who was swinging his gun toward Walt, fell forward on his face.

The third man tried to push past Grady on his horse and the hoofs of the mount almost trampled the frontiersman into the ground. But Grady

swung his rifle. He heard a crunch as an arm broke, then a weapon dropped to the ground and exploded as the hammer struck the rocky trail.

Ulysses swung into position behind his master and the fleeing horse came to a neighing, trampling halt in the narrow trail.

The gunfire subsided almost as quickly as it had started, and Pop Farrell called querulously: "Be you all right, mister?"

"Right as rain," Walt replied, surprised himself that he had not been nicked in the hall of gunfire. "But I don't think we can say the same for our friends. I figure you can bring in your boat now. I don't think anyone is going to take it away from you."

Pop Farrell laid aside his rifle. He went to work on the windlass that picked up the cable and pulled the flat-bottomed ferryboat from one side of the Republican River to the other. Moments later the blunt nose of the craft came to rest against the lip of the wharf and Farrell hooked into the rings on the pier. Then he picked up his gun and came forward.

There was a lantern in his other hand. He lifted it to examine the shambles on the shore.

In a moment Walt was alongside the oldster and said: "You take these horses aboard, and tie them up fast. I'll look after the human cargo."

Farrell gathered up the reins of the three outlaw horses and headed for the ferry. Ulysses followed as though anxious to help Farrell with his chore.

With his rifle back in the scabbard on Ulysses' saddle, Walt moved among the trio on the dock with six-gun in hand. He saw that the spokesman was dead, shot through the middle. One of the other men was badly wounded and whimpering in pain. The man who had tried to make his escape was standing sullenly by. Grady motioned with his gun. "Give your friend a hand, and we'll take him on the boat. Your other pard ain't going to need nothing but a plot six by three.

The road agent put one arm about

his wounded friend and helped him aboard. Grady picked up the body of the dead man and carried it onto the ferry.

He cast off the chain hooks then, and turned to Farrell. "Take it away, mister."

Farrell did so, and the ferry started across the river with its strange cargo.

3



DAISY Farrell was still on the alert at the far side of the river, the Nebraska side.

"How is everything, Pop?" she called.

"Fine and dandy," replied the old man promptly. The moon

came out from behind the clouds then, and bathed the ferry in an eerie lunar spotlight. Daisy had a glimpse of the old man holding the horses and young Walt Grady with his gun leveled on the only able-bodied member of the gun trio.

When the craft came to its mooring, Daisy made it fast, then led the horses up to a crude corral that was fenced in at the rear of the ferry owner's cabin. Walt carried the dead man to the rear of the stable and covered him with an old tarpaulin, then returned to the ferry and helped to get the wounded man and the third prisoner into the Farrell cabin.

Grady bound the prisoner carefully, made certain that he was unarmed and unable to escape; he assisted Daisy in giving first aid to the wounded fellow. "What's your name?" he asked the captive, who was bound to an upright near a bunk.

"If you don't know it now, you're not getting it from me," the ruffian replied.

Walt Grady looked at the girl and her father, but neither one of them seemed to know the identity of their prisoner. When the wounded man had been attended to, Walt bound his

legs, and fastened his hands so that they could not be used unexpectedly to turn the tables. Then he looked at the girl and said: "This is quite an unexpected visit, but it seems to have come at the right time. I have a letter here from your Aunt Emily in Hiawatha. She thought something might have happened to you. It looks as though she had a good hunch."

Daisy forced a laugh, and Pop Farrell chuckled. He looked at the letter and said: "Good old Emily. She always pops up at just the right time, all right."

Grady was conscious of the fact that the girl was looking at him with absorbed attention. "I reckon we've got another chore to attend to, right quick," he said with some embarrassment.

"What's that?" inquired Pop Farrell quickly.

"The folks on the stagecoach," Walt reminded him.

"Gosh," Farrell said crisply, "I sure forgot all about them. We'd better go take a look at them. They're a heap sight more important than these backshooting sidewinders."

"I'll go take a look at them," Walt told him; "I think I have the hang of that ferryboat of yours. You'll have to help your daughter keep an eye on these blackguards until I get back."

Pop Farrell didn't like this abrupt ordering around, but he was smart enough to realize that there was no other way to act. He nodded his head. Daisy followed Walt to the door, and as he stepped out into the night she whispered: "Take care of yourself, mister, and hurry back."

Walt blushed in spite of himself. Then he was whistling for Ulysses and heading for the ferry.

Soon he was tying up at the spot where the three outlaws had braced Farrell. He lighted a lantern and looked over the scene of the excitement as though expecting to find something of interest there.

He picked up several bits of leather and metal that looked as though they might have come from a horse rigging, or perhaps from a gun belt or saddle scabbard. He stuffed these

into his pocket. Then he turned to Ulysses, put his reins about the horse's neck, and swung aboard.

THE ROAD to Beaver City wound upward in a couple of switchbacks to the top of the gorge rim, then straightened out and headed almost due south for a couple of miles until it reached a pass through the hills. Walt Grady cantered along for perhaps ten minutes before he finally spied the stage in the trail ahead of him.

"There it is," he said calmly. Ulysses might have shied at the movement ahead of him, had he not sensed that it was made by the helpless six-horse team of the stagecoach, tangled in its harness. Grady came up alongside the wreckage and swung down. The horses were docile enough. Walt then lighted a match from a block of lucifers and saw two sprawled figures in the road. One of them moved and a groan came from the man's lips.

"Take it easy," Grady counseled. Then he was hurrying forward and kneeling beside the fellow. The man's face was covered with blood which had dried into a black mask with the passage of time and the coolness of the night. Grady poured water from his canteen, lighted a reed torch with the match and stuck it into the wheel of the standing stage.

Then, with this flickering light as an aid, Grady prepared to clean up the man and study the seriousness of his injuries. When the blood was washed away, Grady saw a flickering in the eyes of the wounded man. He opened his lips and tried to suck in some of the water that was trickling down his face. Grady gave him some from the canteen.

His attention was then turned to a smear of red alongside the man's ear and another one on his jacket just below the right shoulder. Grady decided that one bullet had grazed the man's head, while another had gone in high up on his chest. The man finally found his tongue and breath and said: "Glad you made it, stranger, but I'm afraid it's too late to do any good for Chick."

Grady went over to the other body sprawled in the road, and saw the reins of the six-horse team still clutched in the man's hand. He turned over the driver's body and looked at the bullet wound directly between the eyes. Then he shook his head slowly and remarked: "I couldn't have helped your friend Chick if I'd been here five minutes later. They got him and got him good. What happened?"

The shotgun guard talked as Walt worked to ease his pain. Grady cleaned up the head wound as best he could, then bandaged it. Finally he checked the shoulder wound and pushed a wad of clean cloth into the hole so that bleeding would not resume while Grady was taking the man to succor.

"I'm High Pockets Haley," the gun guard declared. "I'm supposed to supply protection for Ballard and his kind on this coach from Kearny to Beaver City. It doesn't look as though I've done much of a job. Three sidewinders opened up at us from the brush there and blew Chick Ballard plumb out of the seat without giving him a chance for his taw."

"Did you know who the three men were?" Grady asked.

"Didn't have time to look them over very well. I blasted at them with my shotgun, but they crossfired on me, and I went pitching off the throne while the horses fought against the reins."

"Was there anything valuable on the coach?" Grady inquired.

"I don't rightly know," Haley replied. "Ballard used to have the papers, and I didn't ask too many questions,"

Haley took another drink; then Grady said to him: "Take it easy here and I'll see if I can't get this stage straightened out. We'll need something to get you to help."

Haley sighed. Grady studied the sky toward the east and saw that day was dawning. He soothed the horses finally managing to unhook the traces of the three teams and to lead them around in a half-circle that made it possible for him to straight-

en out the harness. He checked the animals to make sure that their threshing around hadn't injured their legs, then coupled them to the coach again. He helped Haley inside the vehicle, and now he realized where the man had gotten his name. Haley was a tall, gangly figure and he wore a pair of levis that went well up on his high hips. Grady made him comfortable with several blankets and robes that were inside the coach.

Then he hitched Ulysses behind the coach and climbed up to the box to gather up the reins. He "Gee'd" to the horses and they promptly lined out in the direction of the Arapahoe Gorge.

IN THE morning light, Grady was surprised to discover that, far from being rugged and rocky like the country near the ferry, this part of Nebraska was fertile and a real tall grass country.

"A man could really find a home for himself here."

Grady swung the coach down the switchback and finally halted it at the ferry. He led the horses on carefully so there would be no danger of their going over the low railing of the craft.

Then he chocked the wheels, tied the reins to a stanchion and set to work at the windlass. On the Nebraska side of the river he could see Daisy Farrell watching him from the open doorway of the cabin. She waved to him with one hand and he answered her greeting.

The crossing took about fifteen minutes, and when the boat was tied up at the Nebraska wharf, Grady led the horses off and uncoupled them at the watering trough, which was filled with a pump that went down into the deeper water of the river.

Grady then carried Haley from the coach into the Farrell house and made him comfortable on the bunk. Farrell came from his guard post over the two hold-up men and looked down at Haley.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Pretty bad," Grady replied. "But I've stopped the bleeding and I think

he'll come around. He might do better if we could get the bullet out, but I didn't want to try it without some hot water to sterilize the knife and the wound."

Now that Walt was back, Daisy Farrell busied herself at the cook stove making some breakfast. At Walt's words, she slipped a heavy kettle filled with water over the open coal hole and it soon began to steam.

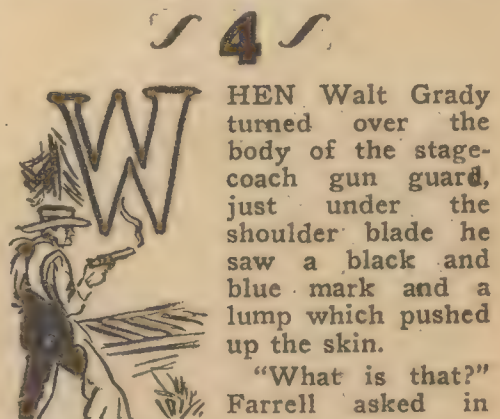
"Any luck finding who our friends are?" Walt asked as they busied themselves undressing High Pockets Haley.

"I don't recognize them at all," Farrell declared, "but Daisy says they look like three of the wranglers who hang around the Henderson Road Ranch about two miles north of here on the Kearney road."

"Road ranch?" Grady inquired. "What's that?"

"That's like a frontier hotel," Farrell explained. "I don't have no facilities for feeding or sleeping overnight guests here. Henderson's place has room for that, and he also sets good drinks before them."

Grady shrugged. "Then I'll have to drop in at Henderson's Road Ranch and do a bit of checking up. But I'll wait until I get back from Kearney."



some surprise.

"It's the bullet," Grady replied. "It must have struck a rib of the shoulder blade; it'll come out with no trouble at all."

Grady drew his hunting knife from its sheath, ran it over the cleansing flame in the stove, then dipped it into

the bowl of boiling water. With one quick thrust he cracked the skin over the bulge on Haley's back, and the leaden pellet popped out into his hand. He picked up a swab, wiped away the pus and blood from the wound, then spilled antiseptic into it.

"Now we'll put a good dressing on this, and in another couple of weeks Haley will never know what happened to him."

"I'll know, sure enough." Haley gulped. "But it feels a heap better right now. Thanks, mister."

Farrell offered the man a good stiff drink of brandy. Grady completed his bandaging and then Haley dropped off to sleep.

Walt washed up and eagerly accepted Daisy's invitation to breakfast. They ate quietly, both because they did not want to disturb Haley, and because they didn't want to relay any information to the road ranch men. But Daisy finally asked: "What are you doing out in this country, Walt?"

"I started out with a wagon train from Saint Joe," Grady replied. "We shopped at Hiawatha to pick up some supplies that were overlooked. That's where I met your aunt."

"Where's the wagon train now?" the girl inquired.

"I'm supposed to meet up with them at Kearney, or maybe at North Platte, depending upon how long it's taken me to deliver your aunt's message."

"Kearney or North Platte," the girl repeated the names slowly, as though each were some Utopia that was miles away beyond the horizon. "Where is the train going?"

"Oregon."

Daisy looked at her father, then looked out the window toward the river. "Do you think you'll ever be coming back this way?"

"Maybe," Walt replied.

"I'm glad to hear that," the girl declared. "I hope you'll say hello when you come through."

"Oh, I'll do that all right," Grady assured her; he turned back to his plate.

It was about eight o'clock when they finally finished the meal. No one

appeared to be in any hurry. Walt felt himself nodding, and he realized that he had had no real sleep for almost twenty-six hours. He knew that the journey ahead of him would be a long and difficult one; he should rest. When he broached the subject to Farrell, the old man said: "Sure thing, son. I'd knock off forty winks if I were you. It would be best for you to pass Henderson's in the dark, and then you'd be well on the way to Kearney by morning. I'll keep a sharp lookout."

WALT SLEPT for seven hours. There was no disturbance from inside or out. He awoke to the sound of pots on the kitchen stove. Daisy was busy with her cooking, and told him that she wanted him to take the trail with a warm meal in his stomach. Grady looked over High Pockets Haley and found that the shotgun driver was doing rather well.

Over the afternoon meal, Grady learned something of the hopes and ambitions of the Farrells, how Pop Farrell had been hoping to make a big name for himself in the West, and how Daisy was loyally sticking with him.

"How are you going to transport those prisoners?" Farrell finally asked.

"I'll tie them up and put them in the coach," Grady replied. "It won't be very comfortable, but it's better than they deserve."

"Them fellows are slipperier than a bucket full of eels. They'll wriggle out of them ropes surer than fate. I reckon maybe one of us ought to go along and keep an eye on them."

Daisy looked at Walt and shook her head slowly. High Pockets Haley supplied the solution to this impasse. "I'll look after those sidewinders," he volunteered. "I'm fit to ride now, and while I'm working for the Overland Mail, I reckon I can still hold a shotgun on those hombres. I've got my lungs left, too, and I can sure bellow out loud if they try to wriggle out of those ropes."

Walt was skeptical about Haley's fitness. At the same time he didn't want to discourage his undaunted

spirit. "I think that's a good solution; we'll truss up those boys so they can't get loose unless they take the coach with them, and when they get a glimpse of Haley aiming a double-barreled-shotgun at them, I don't think they'll argue."

It was just before dark that the stagecoach was loaded up and the three teams were hitched in. Farrell and Walt Grady had buried the dead outlaw on a knoll nearby in an unmarked grave. The wounded man and his companion were put on one side of the coach with their backs toward Grady. He could look down into the coach from his lofty perch, and keep an eye on them.

High Pockets Haley, well bundled up in robes and blankets, was made comfortable on the rear seat. His shotgun, loaded with two charges of heavy buckshot, was cradled in his arms, and he looked like a Sioux squaw. He chuckled as he thought of the picture he must make.

Ulysses was hitched on behind the stagecoach, and with a farewell to the Farrells, Walt Grady gathered up the reins and kicked off the brake.

"Here we go!" he shouted. The horses pulled into their collars, caught a foothold on the upgrade and the stage moved ahead. Walt looked back and waved to the ferry tender and his daughter as he headed into the winding road that went meandering across the prairie.

He was laying out his plan of operation as he rode along. There was no point in attracting the attention of the folks at the Henderson Road Ranch. About a mile before they reached this settlement on the Kearney trail, Grady swung the horses into an alternate trail that swung over to the east, and it was not long before he saw the lighted windows of the road ranch off toward his left.

As the lights swung away toward the west, he looked down into the coach and asked:

"How are you doing, Haley?"

"Okay now," Haley replied crisply, "but I sure had to gag them two hombres. They might have let out a bel-low that could've been heard all the way to the ranch. Of course Hender-

son would probably figure it was a coyote or one of them wild animals, but there's no sense in taking chances. Sounds travel a long way in this part of the country."

WALT HAD planned to travel two hours and rest his horses a half-hour; then he would resume the trip for another two hours. This would permit the horses to keep up a good gait, and when they came back to the stagecoach road they would make excellent time.

Just before dawn Grady unhitched his team and permitted them to drink at a small creek that purled northward toward the North Platte River. The animals appreciated this breather, and also appreciated the oats that Grady offered them while he was eating his own breakfast and feeding his companion and the prisoners.

Back on the road, Grady kept the horses moving along at a good clip. At a little after ten he saw another coach coming from the opposite direction and decided that it was the Beaver City coach going the other way; as it came close, the shotgun guard of the southbound stage, recognizing a stranger on the box, swung his gun toward Grady and asked:

"What are you doing aboard that stage, hombre?"

"Pinch-hitting for Chick Ballard," Walt replied coolly. "He ain't in no shape to handle the ribbons no more."

The gun guard was still skeptical until High Pockets Haley stuck his head out of the coach door and shouted: "Button your lip, Sparrow. Walt Grady is doing a good job, and the Overland is beholden to him."

"Humph," replied the man called Sparrow. "Since when are the Overland shotgun guards riding inside like a bunch of dudes? Why don't you get up on the box where you belong?"

"Because I'm packing the leavings of some drygulch lead, and holding a bead on two of the busters who cracked a cap at me and Ballard. I figure they're heading for a hang-noose holiday, but you can't always tell."

Sparrow whistled, then swung down

off the box of his coach and walked over to look into the Ballard equipage. He saw the wounded bandit and his companion and the wrapped form of Chick Ballard. "I don't see why you're feeding and pampering sidewinders like those. We ought to salivate them right here and now." Sparrow lifted his gun in a menacing motion.

"None of that," Haley protested. "We figure we might be able to make these birdies do some singing. Then we may be able to hit the viper who's cooking up trouble on this trail. Savvy?"

"Keno!" replied Sparrow. "Take good care of that cottonwood fruit, and I'll be seeing you when I hit Kearney next week. *Adios.*"

Sparrow climbed back alongside his own driver, waved a greeting, and the two stages passed on the trail. Grady was becoming tired of the long stretch and the unaccustomed position on the box, but he realized that there could be no hope of relief until he reached Kearney.

THE STOPPED again at about six o'clock, and High Pockets Haley told him that he was still about twelve miles from the frontier town and cavalry post on the North Platte.

"Do you think we ought to go through tonight?" Grady asked.

"It might be a good idea; Henderson has missed his boys by this time, and he's going to be out looking for them. He'll probably head back toward the ferry crossing and inquire there. Farrell and his daughter won't answer any questions, but Henderson is liable to be curious about that new grave. Sparrow is likely to talk too much when he stops at the road ranch. He may not realize that we're in danger here."

"I'm not afraid of Sparrow," Walt Grady said calmly, "but I didn't think about that new grave. It will be something to question."

The party rested for about two hours, and then a little after nine o'clock at night the horses were inspanned and the coach took up its run. The horses journeyed the first six miles at a rather leisurely lope,

then suddenly seemed to realize that their work would not be done until they were back in their stables at Kearney.

They picked up their gait, and Walt had no trouble with them at all. His chief task was to keep them from going off the road and into the brush on either side. When they approached the North Platte, Haley indicated the ford, and Grady slowed down the beasts and turned them in that direction.

The lights of Kearney were visible as they came across the ford. The water flowing over the rock shelf was about two feet deep, and it swirled about the hocks of the horses and through the spokes of the wheels. Then the animals were lunging into the collars and pulling up the bank onto the road that ran into the post.

Oil lamps were on posts in front of buildings that made up the trading post and cavalry headquarters. Other lights shone out from the buildings that lined the trail. Sounds of music, talking and laughter came to the ears of the coach driver and his companions.

High Pockets Haley leaned out of the coach and said: "The Overland office is right up to the left there, Walt. You've done a corking good job."

Grady accepted the comment with good grace. His attention was directed toward a group of wagons parked in an open area some distance from the cavalry detachment. Hot coals marked the spots where cooking fires had been built. Now, however, it was obvious that the camp was settling down for the night.

"Looks like Oregon Jackson and the folks arrived in good order," Grady commented.

"Is that your wagon train?" Haley inquired.

"I reckon it is," Grady replied. Then he was bringing the horses to a halt before the Overland Stage office, and was locking the brakes as he swung the ribbons around the handle. Hostlers came out of the stables to the rear and grabbed for the horses. A tall, burly-looking man came out of the stage office, and High Pockets Haley said:

"Rough trip, Skipper, but Walt Grady sure tooled us through. Skipper Tarbell, I'd like to make you acquainted with the man who jumped in when Chick Ballard got himself salivated by a trio of sidewinders."

"What happened to the sidewinders?" Tarbell asked grimly, without more than a nod of greeting.

"One of them is decorating the prairie grass," replied Haley promptly. "Another is inside with lead in his brisket, and the third one is waiting to be a cottonwood apple."

This information caused Tarbell to brighten. He hastened to assist Haley with his prisoner, then noticed that the shotgun guard was wounded.

"Where did they nail you, Haley?" he asked.

"Once in the head and once in the shoulder," Haley replied calmly. "Old Man Farrell and Walt Grady gave them what-for. I had nothing to do with it."

"Thanks, Grady, thanks a lot," Tarbell told him. "We'll see that you're not forgotten for this chore."

"Good enough," Grady replied. "I reckon these prisoners ought to go to either the sheriff or the Army. I'll look into that."

There was a storeroom in the rear of the stage station of the Overland Mail, and Tarbell helped Haley and Grady to let their prisoners into it. Then Tarbell came outside to make certain that the mail and other items carried by the Beaver City stage were taken care of.

When Ulysses had been fed and watered at the livery stable, Grady returned to the front of the stage station and found Tarbell waiting for him there.

"I'm having the doctor look at Haley," Tarbell declared. "From what he tells me, you did a first rate job on him, but there's no harm in making certain."

"Certainly not," agreed Grady.

"I'll walk down to the commandant's quarters with you," Tarbell suggested.

WALT GRADY was willing. The two men sauntered down the street of the frontier town. Now and

then they had to walk around debris and rubbish that had been thrown into the street. Finally they came to the entrance to the military post. A sentry was patrolling his beat before the gate and came to attention as the two men strode up.

"Good evening, Mr. Tarbell," he greeted Skipper pleasantly. "Out kind of late, aren't you?"

"The Overland Mail is busy twenty-four hours a day," Tarbell replied with a chuckle. "I have important business with your commandant. Where is he?"

"Colonel Quinn is in his quarters. He has some distinguished company with him. I'll tell him you're here." The sentry raised his voice and called: "Corporal of the guard. Post number one!"

The corporal of the guard came from the guardhouse and greeted Tarbell. Then he led the stage agent and his companion down along the company street until they came to a well built two story log house. The corporal went inside, and returned a few minutes later to say:

"Colonel Quinn will see you, gentlemen."

Tarbell led the way into the colonel's quarters. The log house was sturdily constructed and the wide windows on the ground floor had heavy shutters that could be closed and barred for defense against any possible attack. The second floor openings were little more than loopholes.

The front room of the house was set up as an office. Its austerity was broken only by two heavy Morris chairs, one set at each side of a big rough-hewn desk. In one chair sat a distinguished-looking gentleman with white sideburn whiskers. He wore a frock coat and dark trousers, and patent leather boots were visible beneath his trouser legs. Tarbell ignored the man in Army uniform and hurried forward. The distinguished-looking gentleman rose to his feet. Tarbell said: "Governor Burnham, this is an unexpected pleasure."

"Sam Tarbell," replied the governor pleasantly. "I didn't know you were here. And who is your friend?"

Skipper Tarbell introduced Walt

Grady; then after a brief pause he said: "Mr. Grady doesn't believe that the highways of our great state are as safe as they should be."

Colonel Quinn cleared his throat, and Tarbell continued his introduction. Finally Quinn settled himself in his chair and said: "Let's hear more about it."

Walt Grady launched into a resume of his experiences during the past three days.

5



COLONEL Quinn and Governor Burnham listened to the recountal with a great deal of interest. They stopped only long enough to accept glasses of port wine that were brought in by an orderly. When Walt Grady was finished,

Governor Burnham turned to Tarbell and asked: "Have you learned the identity of these fellows, Sam?"

"Oh, yes," Tarbell replied. "I didn't realize that Grady was unfamiliar with them—but since he has just come from the East it is not too strange. The wounded man is Pecos Porter. He's been mixed up in a lot of shady dealings on the frontier and he had a pretty bloody name during the war. The other man who came through with a whole skin is Dan Purdue. From what Haley and Grady tell me, I figure that the dead man was Slim Burdick. He's never been any credit to the great state of Nevada."

Burnham shrugged. "Any idea who they're working for?"

"None that I can prove," Tarbell replied. The governor looked at Grady.

"Miss Farrell at Arapahoe Gorge tells me that they were seen hanging around the Henderson Road Ranch between here and the Republican River."

Tarbell sniffed. Colonel Quinn looked at him curiously. Then the stage agent remarked: "You can't blame Henderson for everyone who

hangs around his place. Most of our stages stop there overnight; that's no sign that there's anything wrong with the folks who ride on them."

Colonel Quinn nodded, then turned to Walt. "Did you have much trouble with those fellows? From what I've heard, Pecos Porter and Dan Purdue are pretty handy with their six-guns, and they're not always particular about whether they shoot a man in the back; Slim Burdick was of the same stripe."

"We didn't have too much trouble," Grady replied modestly. "Pop Farrell already had a rifle on them when I rode into the picture. They were trying to get him to ferry them across the Republican after the stage hold-up. You might say they were caught in a forked tree when I came along."

"Where are they now?" Quinn asked.

"Locked up in the stage station," Tarbell replied. "I didn't know whether to hand them over to Sheriff Wilson or to you."

"We'll talk to the sheriff in the morning," the colonel declared. "I'd like to sleep on the problem. And I'm sure the governor would like to turn in, too."

Grady and Tarbell took this for a dismissal and left the governor and the colonel. As they strolled back to the stage station, Tarbell offered the young frontiersman a bed for the night and Grady willingly accepted.

He was asleep almost as soon as his head struck the pillow in Tarbell's cabin, and it was mid-morning before he woke up.

AS HE LAY there blinking at the sun that poured in through the window, he heard voices in the other room. One of them he recognized as that of Skipper Sam Tarbell; the other was the voice of a stranger. From the conversation, however, he immediately realized who the man must be.

"Haley will file the complaint," Tarbell was saying. "It was out and out murder. They didn't give Ballard a chance at all; they shot him down as he rode the box. It was lucky Haley came out of it alive."

"I'm not sure that I like this set-up," declared the other man. "Porter

and Purdue have plenty of friends in town, and I wouldn't want to face any of them. This is a job for the Army."

"Sheriff Wilson," Tarbell said, "I'm merely calling the matter to your attention. What you do about it is your own business."

Grady swung to a sitting position, pulled on his boots and brushed his fingers through his hair. More detailed ablutions would wait until he got out to the water in the kitchen. He stepped through the door into the living room where the sheriff and the stage agent were seated. Wilson looked at him in surprise. Tarbell introduced the two men, and Wilson said: "Glad to know you, Grady. It sure looks as though you blew into town in a blaze of glory. Just the same, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes."

"I like them," Walt replied, deliberately misunderstanding the sheriff's insinuation. "But why do you figure on turning these fellows over to the Army? Haven't you got enough on them to try them and hang them legally?"

"Maybe," Wilson conceded, "but you've got to remember that this is still pretty wild country. It wouldn't do me any good to hang Purdue and Porter on Tuesday if their friends were to hang me on Wednesday, now would it?"

This sounded like good frontier logic, but Walt was still skeptical. "Why do you figure the Army has an interest in this case?"

"Tarbell's stages carry the United States mail," Wilson pointed out. "Any threat to the stages is a threat to the mails between Kearney and Beaver City. It's up to Colonel Quinn to see that the mail goes through without being molested. Am I right?"

"Perhaps you're right," Grady conceded. "But if you are, I'd say that it would be wise for you to get your prisoners over to the Army post before some of their numerous friends discover they're here in the stage station and come around to set them free."

Sheriff Wilson's hand went to his gun as though some of the outlaw henchmen were already pounding on

the door. Skipper Tarbell chuckled. Wilson realized that they were making fun of him, but under the circumstances there was nothing he could do about it.

"That's a good idea," he said haltingly. "I'll go right over to the Army post and ask Colonel Quinn to send along a squad of men to take care of the prisoners."

Sheriff Wilson hurried off without delay. Tarbell and Grady chuckled; then, after Tarbell had invited Grady to have his breakfast, the stage agent said: "Now you see what we're up against. We certainly ought to have some changes made around here."

GRADY WAS halfway through his meal when the corporal and a squad of four men arrived to take charge of the prisoners. Tarbell unlocked the door to the storeroom and led the two men out. The wounded Porter was able to navigate, but did not like the idea of being in custody. He voiced his objections in colorful language.

Tarbell and Grady went out on the veranda when they had finished eating and Walt Grady studied the bustling frontier post. He saw some of his friends of the wagon train and nodded to them. Later he saw Governor Burnham coming toward the stage office, and finally the state's chief executive came up on the stoop and sat down beside them.

"Good morning, Governor," Grady said pleasantly. "I hope you had a pleasant rest last night."

"Splendid, splendid," the governor responded. "I like this country. I think it is one of the nicest parts of the state. But I'm interested in that Arapahoe Gorge section; what do you think of it?"

"Unfortunately I haven't had the opportunity to see much of it," Grady replied. "But from what little I have seen, I think it's a paradise on earth. In fact, I was going to ask you last night whether it was open to homesteading."

Governor Burnham reflected for some moments, then remarked:

"That's the area between the Republican River and Beaver Creek, isn't it?"

"Right," replied Grady.

"The land office is working on the plans for that area right now," Governor Burnham declared. "I don't think the official maps have come to Kearney as yet. But I feel that you've done the state a great service in helping us to uncover the activities of men like Porter and Purdue, and in ridding us of Burdick; I'd like to show my appreciation. If you'll draw up your papers for the land you're interested in, I'll take them back to Lincoln with me."

"Very good, sir," Grady replied. He was delighted now that he had come to Kearney, because it certainly looked as though things were going very well for him. They chatted about a number of other things, and finally the governor took his leave.

GRADY WAITED around for a while; then he went up to the land office and studied some of the maps there. He sensed from the governor's words that his plans along the Beaver Creek and Republican River should be kept a secret, at least for the time being. Therefore Grady asked for blanks and studied maps more or less casually, but enough to locate the essential boundary information that he would need. With this in his possession, he went back to Tarbell's office, filled out the documents, then took them to Governor Burnham personally at the Army post.

"You're a man who doesn't let any grass grow under his feet," the governor said with a smile. "I'll look after these papers personally, and you may be assured that everything will be all right. Where can I reach you?"

"I reckon I'll be heading back to the Farrell place on the Republican River, sir," Grady told him.

"That sounds like a splendid idea," the governor replied with a chuckle. He patted Grady on the shoulder, congratulated him again, and bade him farewell.

Grady was walking on air as he headed out of the cavalry post and down into the frontier town. He looked over the resorts and spotted the bulky platform in front of the Border House.

Grady ducked under the hitch-rail, moved across the veranda and through the batwing doors. He paused inside to accustom himself to the gloom, then saw the long bar running along the right hand wall. Four bartenders were busy pushing filled glasses across the imitation mahogany.

Several men turned around to study him as Grady moved into the room. He put one foot on the brass rail, snapped a coin on the counter and asked for a whiskey.

The nearest bartender slid the drink to him, picked up the coin and bounced it on the bar before dropping it into the till. Grady picked up his glass and had it halfway to his lips when a man pushed up alongside of him and asked: "Are you Walt Grady?"

Grady studied the burly-looking man before him, ran his eyes over the greasy leather clothing he wore, noticed the low-hanging pistol belt and the gun that jutted out from it. Then he drank his liquor with a neat twist of his wrist. "I'm Grady; what of it?"

"I'm Buck Dalton," announced the other man.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Dalton," Grady replied casually. "You the reception committee for Kearney?"

"Reception committee?" Dalton repeated the words with some amazement. Back in the crowd Dalton heard someone snicker and realized that he was being laughed at. He turned to Grady and snarled: "You might call me the reception committee you'd be expecting."

A bartender came up behind Grady and whispered: "Dalton's quick on the trigger, mister. We don't want no trouble in here."

Grady nodded his understanding; then he looked into Dalton's eyes without wavering and said: "Mr. Dalton, I ain't much good at riddles. Will you just turn up your hole card, and sort of let me know what you're driving at?"

Dalton bellied up against Walt as though anxious to pin him against the bar, but Grady wasn't accustomed to being pushed around. He stood his ground and stepped down on Dalton's toe with the heel of his riding boot.

A grimace crossed Dalton's face and he said: "Slim Burdick was my pard!"

"Is that so?" Grady asked casually. "You don't keep such good company, do you?"

Another snicker came from the crowd, which was obviously enjoying this exchange. It kindled the anger in Dalton's breast. He dropped his hand to his pistol butt, and Grady looked into his eyes without faltering.

"Mr. Dalton," he said calmly, "your friend Slim Burdick ran into more gun trouble than he was able to handle. You ought to take lessons from what happened to him. They tell me it ain't no fun to try and look at the sun from under six feet of dirt."

THE MEN in the room started drawing away in an arc. Grady studied them out of the corner of his eye without losing any of his alertness. Most of the men were of the stripe of Buck Dalton, but in one corner of the room Grady saw Tex Cronin and some of the young men from the wagon train.

"You figger I ought to turn tail and run, mister," Dalton asked grimly, "just because you tell me what happened to Slim Burdick?"

"Mebbeso," Grady replied. "I didn't come here looking for no trouble. I ain't an easy man to push into a pistol panic, but when I do get into it, I'm a ringtailed catawampus."

"Slim was my pal, just like I said," Dalton insisted; "and I'm taking up his fight right here and now."

Dalton had thrown down the gauntlet and there was noway of ducking the challenge. But the initiative was still with Grady. Dalton wanted to goad him into an overt movement so he would have a semblance of justification on his side.

But Walt amazed him. Instead of striking for his own gun, Grady's hand dropped down to the outthrust butt of Dalton's gun. He flicked it out of the holster with one quick movement and sent it hurtling through the air in the direction of Tex Cronin.

The alert young Texas cowboy caught it in a deft motion and stuffed it into his cartridge belt. Grady

stepped back then, and calmly began to unbuckle his own gun belt.

Oregon Jackson pushed past Tex Cronin and Walt Grady handed him his pistols and belt. Then he spat on the palms of his hands and turned back to Dalton to say: "Mr. Dalton, I reckon I'm going to take you apart right here and now to see just what makes you tick!"

Buck Dalton rushed forward with all the ugliness of a crippled bear. He lowered his head, hoping to butt Grady in the stomach and put him out of the fight at once. But Grady straightened him up with an uppercut to the jaw. There were gasps all around the room as Buck Dalton staggered backward, struck against the edge of the bar and fell forward on the floor.

Buck shook his head, climbed slowly to his feet and looking at his adversary with glowering eyes. Walt took up his position on the alert; he knew that this encounter was merely beginning.

6



GRIM tension filled the room of the Border House. Walt Grady knew instinctively that he was in the enemy's stronghold without actually realizing who the enemy was and why he should be opposed to Walt.

He gritted his teeth massaged his right fist with his left, and turned to meet the frontier ruffian. Buck Dalton pushed himself to his feet, got one arm over the edge of the imitation mahogany bar and pulled himself erect. Blood was coming from the corners of his mouth and it ran down into his matted beard. Suddenly he set himself with a snarl and remarked: "You caught me off guard, mister, but you ain't doing it again."

Dalton uncoiled himself then and lunged forward at the grim-faced Grady. Walt swerved backward to

get out in the open where he would have more room to swing. Dalton stood up straight and began swinging.

The round-house rights and lefts could not all be avoided; several of them struck Walt Grady and stung him.

He burrowed through Dalton's swinging fists and caught the man on the chest. His hands were scratched by the buttons on the fellow's shirt, but in the excitement he did not notice the blood that caked on them. He brought up a short, chopping blow and it landed alongside Dalton's jaw. The townsman was staggered. One of his henchmen caught him and kept him from going over backward onto the sawdust that covered the dirt floor.

"Give it to him, Dalton," his companion shouted encouragement. Walt was breathing heavily, and it was plain that he was not having an easy time in this exchange of rough fist-cuffs. Dalton, at a shove from his pal, came plunging at Walt Grady, and the latter was slow in sidestepping. His foot slipped on a wet spot on the floor and he dropped down to catch his balance with his hand. Dalton's knee came up and struck Grady on the chin.

He fell over backward as though he had been poleaxed. Dalton let out a snarl of triumph and came hurtling forward in a great leap. His hob-nailed boots were aimed for Grady's face, but Tex Cronin pushed forward and lunged at Dalton. The gunman went off balance and staggered away.

Walt shook his head, cleared some of the cobwebs from his brain, then staggered to his feet. He rubbed his chin reflectively and muttered:

"Thanks, Tex!"

Several men tried to grab the Texas cowboy by the arms, but he shrugged them off, turned with a leveled gun and gritted: "This is going to be an equal fight, or someone is going to eat lead!"

No one wanted to argue; they still felt that Dalton was more than master of the situation. When he came in and struck the dazed Grady several times in the face, closing one eye and opening his cheek with a rough ring that

he wore on one finger, it looked as though their confidence in the local champion were justified.

Grady knew that matters were going against him, but somewhere from deep within his being he mustered the added strength for one flurry of blows that would either make or break him.

Dalton could not understand this renewed offensive and he teetered backward on his heels. Walt rushed him before he could regain his balance and, bringing up a right uppercut, landed the blow on the point of Dalton's jaw. Dalton's eyes closed and he fell back among his comrades as though he had been struck with a bull-hook.

A long gasp of surprise came from the throats of the onlookers. Then Dalton was up. The smoky lamps of the room sent down beams of light, and one of those struck the unsheathed barrel of the gun that Dalton held in his hand.

"He's got a gun, Walt!" Tex Cronin shouted. The dazed Grady moved to one side as though this action alone would be enough to ward off the menace that faced him. Then Dalton's jaw tensed, his finger went white on the trigger and there was a sharp blast. But a split second before it exploded Tex Cronin's gun roared and Buck Dalton's weapon dropped on the floor as it went off.

The batwing doors smashed open as the room grew strangely silent following the sudden climax to the fist fight.

"What's going on here?" demanded the sharp voice of Sheriff Wilson.

Walt Grady was taking his gun belt from the hands of Tex Cronin and buckling it around his middle. Several of the men who were clustered about Buck Dalton had their guns half out of their holsters, but the unwavering muzzle of Tex's gun threatened each and every one of them.

"Buck Dalton took up for Slim Burdick," Walt explained calmly. "I figured to give him satisfaction with bare fists. But Buck Dalton reckoned that knees and guns were needed.

Tex Cronin was a mite faster on the trigger."

Sheriff Wilson looked from Grady to his companion. Then he looked across at Dalton and the rough and ready warriors who flanked him on either side.

"It shore looks like things have come to a pretty pass here," Wilson observed. "I reckon you and your friend had better hightail it before the roof of the Border House falls in on you."

Walt nodded to Tex Cronin. Both men pouched their guns with snorts of disdain, turned on their heels and strode to the batwings and out into the street.

"What do we do now?" Tex asked calmly. "I'll walk you back to the wagon train," Walt replied, anxious to settle his nerves after the grim encounter in the Border House.

"Are you going on toward Laramie with us?" Cronin inquired with interest.

"Not so as you could notice it," Walt replied. "I've found my own particular paradise, and I'm going to work my fingers to the bone until I can make something out of it. I've got a real cowman's paradise right down along the Kansas-Nebraska border on the south bank of the Republican River. It has everything. It's hemmed in by high mountains so the cattle can't drift to hellangone. It has some of the deepest graze ever seen on the prairies, and plenty of water."

"Golly," replied Cronin, "that sure sounds like something. How did you find this place?"

"You can say I have Slim Burdick and his pals to thank for that. I found the spot when I went to check up on the stagecoach robbery after meeting up with the road agents at the Araphoe Gorge ferry. I've got one spot on a knoll there that will make an ideal place for a home. Mister, that's country."

Tex Cronin looked toward the south as though his eyes could span the distance between Kearney and the Republican River, and could actually see the spot Grady was describing. Then he put one arm about

Grady's shoulder and said:

"Mister, you ain't going to be able to carve a cattle empire out of that country all by yourself. Me and the boys would sure like to side you with it.

Although glad to have this show of interest from the young Texan, Grady still felt that they owed a certain amount of allegiance to the wagon train.

"What's Oregon Jackson going to say about that?" he asked.

"We ain't going to let him down," Cronin declared promptly. "He figgers that if he gets to Laramie the soldiers will send along an escort. Seems that the Government is going to set up posts along the trail at Fort Hall and Fort Vancouver and a couple of other places in between. They can go with the levies that are heading out to man the forts. Two or three Texas cowboys ain't going to make no never mind to them. Besides, they knew we were looking for good cattle grazing ground. We figgered to find it in Wyoming or Montana, but if it is here, so much the better."

Walt Grady nodded his understanding. They were close to the wagon train now, and several of the teamsters and their wives looked at Grady and his companion with interest. Some of them had heard of the attempted robbery of the Overland Mail stage and the part Grady had taken in thwarting it. They smiled and waved to him.

OREGON Jackson met them, and while they were talking Sheriff Wilson arrived at the camp and sought out the group. He patted Grady on the shoulder and said: "Mister, you're a man after my own heart and I wouldn't want to see anything happen to you. You shore walked into a nest of sidewinders when you went into the Border House. Buck Dalton is riled up fit to spit poison. Are you heading out with the wagon train?"

"No, sir," Grady replied promptly. "I'm heading south for the Republican."

Sheriff Wilson shook his head slowly. Then he reached inside his

coat and brought out a poke of money. He passed this over to Grady and said: "Just so you're getting out of Kearney, I reckon that's all I can ask. Here's a little dinero to help you out. It seems the Overland Mail has a reward posted for them that takes care of bandits who threaten their shipments. You've shore earned it—and all the grief that goes with it. You can thank Skipper Tarbell if Buck Dalton lets you live long enough to enjoy it."

Walt Grady opened the poke and rifled through the money. It amounted to twenty-five hundred dollars. He whistled at his unexpected good fortune, then turned to Tex Cronin and said: "It sure looks as though I'm going to have some beef on that spread for you hombres to rustle when you get back from Laramie. Thanks for helping me out of a tight spot, Tex."

The two men shook hands, and then Walt nodded to the old wagon boss and turned to stride off with Sheriff Wilson.

When they were alone, Wilson remarked: "I'm not the sort of a fellow to ride herd on a grown maverick, but I sure think that you're not taking Dalton and his crew as plumb serious as they ought to be taken. You've got your fangs and he's got his, and so far you've been tolerable lucky, but luck can't carry you along all the time. Keep your eyes peeled, and see if you can't grow a pair in the back of your head."

"Okay, Sheriff," Grady thanked him. Then they parted and Walt Grady went to find his Ulysses horse.

DARKNESS had fallen when Walt loaded his saddle bags with supplies secured for him by Sheriff Wilson, tightened the cinches on his sorrel stallion and swung aboard his kak. He peered sharply into all of the shadowy alleys. His keen eyes swept the veranda of the Border House to seek out a lurking gunman who might be there. Yet he was not too expectant of another encounter with Buck Dalton.

Dalton would hardly try to dry-gulch him right in the center of

Kearney where everyone knew that they had fought in the saloon. Too many people would immediately point a finger at the gunman, and he might well be gallows fruit before morning. If there was any menace from the black-bearded, blustering trigger man it would come out on the range where no semblance of the law existed.

Ulysses jogged along the stage road and rambled on until they were about fifteen miles outside of Kearney. Then Walt turned into a thicket, off-saddled and picketed his pony. He wrapped himself in his blankets and dropped into slumber.

He had been asleep for about six hours when he felt the ground rumble beneath him. He came up on an elbow. His fingers closed over the butt of the gun in his holster close by. His camp was on a little knoll and he could look down the incline to the stage road. A group of horsemen were coming along from the direction of Kearney, riding at a canter.

Now and then high voices echoed in the cool morning air. Some of the group were laughing raucously. Walt studied the men on the road. There were six of them, and prominent among the sextette was Buck Dalton. One arm was in a sling.

Without so much as a glance in the direction of Grady's camp the riders moved on to the south. There was a cloud of dust in the air as they passed and Walt Grady was tempted to sneeze. Instead he merely settled back in his soogans, rested his head on one arm and went to sleep.

It was almost eight o'clock when he roused himself again.

When Ulysses was grained and Walt had finished his own hot breakfast, he rigged the sorrel for the trail, and they set out. The frontiersman knew that he would have to be on the alert in case Dalton and his men were waiting in ambush ahead of him. But tracking was one chore that Grady liked. It sharpened his senses, and made it possible for him to determine whether he had lost any of his old skill.

He had no trouble recognizing the hoofmarks of the six horses that had carried Dalton and his men south-

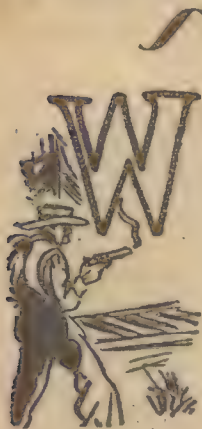
ward. About ten miles south of his camp he saw the marks of a pole tra-vois and knew that an Indian family was moving westward into Colorado. Perhaps a hunter who had followed his game far to the east and was now moving toward a settlement in the vicinity of Fort Morgan.

Just after noon Walt located the spot where the men had stopped for their meal. Ashes were scattered about and turned under the dirt, and the browse nearby indicated that it had received the hungry attention of the mounts.

The afternoon went by quickly, and Grady watched the sun sinking in the west as though it were a friend who had accompanied him on a long jaunt and was now going to a well earned rest.

From landmarks which he had spotted while driving north with the Overland stage, Grady knew that he was coming within about eight miles of the Henderson Road Ranch.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers and remarked calmly. "I'll drop in on Henderson and see just what kind of a hombre he is."



ALT GRADY approached the Henderson Road Ranch about an hour later. At first it was merely a pattern of lighted windows in the darkness of the night. Tall trees loomed up about it, a curious sight on the flat and rolling prairie; to the north there was a large corral and a blacksmith shop. Red coals were still glowing in the forge.

To the rear there were storage sheds, and several barrels for whiskey or other drinks were piled on a rear veranda. A hitch rail ran along the south side of the large, sprawling building.

This structure was two stories in height and there was a covered ver-

anda around both floors. Sounds of laughter came from inside the building, interspersed with raucous shouts and bursts of profanity.

Walt swung down from the sorrel when he was about fifty yards from the road ranch. He led his horse forward and the heavy dust of the yard cushioned his footsteps. Even so his approach was not altogether silent. The saddle leather creaked and the metal jingled on the horse's accoutrements. But Ulysses reached the watering trough and dropped his muzzle into the cooling fluid before anything happened.

Then a man came from the blacksmith shop and said pleasantly. "Welcome to Henderson's, hombre. Are you going to light down and wet your whistle?"

"Howdy," Walt returned the greeting. "Maybe I will wash out the trail dust. Many folks around?"

"Not so many," replied the holster. "I'll look after your bronc for you."

"Grain him and then give him a helping of hay," Grady ordered promptly. He flipped a silver dollar toward the fellow, who caught it deftly. Then Grady settled his gun belt on his hip, brushed fingers over the butt of his Colts and strode toward the veranda steps.

As he climbed the steps new strength and courage flowed through him like some exhilarating wine. He paused on the broad porch and looked in through the windows. There were a number of men lined up at a long bar, and some others playing cards or drinking at deal tables covered by checked oilcloth.

Grady studied the men in the room but did not recognize any of them. If Dalton and his men were there they were not in the public room. Grady pushed into the building, blinked to accustom his eyes to the light, then headed toward the bar. Several men moved along to make a place for him, and he ordered a drink.

The bartender filled his order promptly and stopped to chat. Walt told him a few things about Kerney, then asked: "Is Henderson around?"

The bartender raised his eyes for

the briefest part of a moment. "Are you a friend of Art Henderson's?"

"You might call it that," Walt said. "I've no reason to call him enemy that I know of."

The bartender relaxed. "I reckon Art Henderson is over there in the office. I don't see him out here."

Walt spotted the room on the opposite end of a corridor that led to the second-floor stairway. He thanked the bartender, snapped a coin on the bar for his drink and headed in the direction of the office.

Grady looked back into the barroom before he knocked on the door. There was an open transom above the door but no sound of conversation or activity came through it. No one in the barroom appeared to be particularly interested in Grady's request, so he rapped on the door.

"Come in," a voice called almost immediately.

Grady opened the door and a moment later found himself in a neatly furnished room. A young man in a frock coat and neatly tailored trousers was seated at a rolled-top desk. He looked up and there was a pleasant smile on his face. The man wore a high stock with a bow tie and a flowered vest that was decorated by a heavy gold watch chain.

Grady judged that Henderson was in his thirties. He was a suave, dapper hombre, and his smile indicated that he liked to be considered a hail fellow well met.

"What can I do for you, mister?" he asked pleasantly.

"I'm Walt Grady," the frontiersman announced, watching to see whether the name would mean anything to the ranch owner.

"Glad to know you, Grady," Henderson replied calmly. "You're a newcomer in this country, aren't you?"

"You might say so," Grady replied, not wanting to tell Henderson too much about himself until he was assured of the man's bonafides. He had met any number of clever Mississippi and Missouri River gamblers who smiled while they cheated a man of his last dollar.

"Glad to see new blood coming into

the country," Henderson told him. "It's the one thing that's going to make this wilderness a real empire. People are a lot more important than land. Yes, sir!"

"You're right there," Walt agreed. "But they've got to be the right kind of people."

Henderson frowned at this statement.

"That's understood," he finally replied. "But I'm sure you didn't come to talk to me about the sort of people who are coming into this part of the West. Or did you?"

"Right now I'm interested in three people"—Walt hesitated—"three people and their friends."

"Do I know them?" Henderson asked.

"I wonder," Walt remarked. "They were named Pecos Porter, Dan Purdue and Slim Burdick!"

IF GRADY had expected to surprise any unusual reaction from Arthur Henderson he was doomed to disappointment. Henderson studied his visitor at some length, ran his fingers through his long curly hair and remarked: "The names don't sound familiar to me. But then this is a big country. If I hear of them I'll let you know. Where are you staking out?"

Walt Grady delayed his answer for a while. Could Daisy Farrell have been wrong when she had mentioned having seen the trio of stage bandits at the Henderson Road Ranch working as wranglers?

"Maybe someone else around here knows these fellows," Grady suggested promptly. "Do you know a fellow named Buck Dalton?"

"Buck Dalton?" Henderson shook his head emphatically. "There used to be a gunman named Buck Dalton up around Laramie and North Platte, but that's a long way from here. Why do you ask about him?"

"Because I have a hunch that Buck Dalton stopped here for dinner some time today!" Grady said promptly.

Henderson came up out of his chair and gripped the edges of his desk. Walt ignored the dismay that was etched on the man's face and drew

the makings from his pocket and calmly began rolling a cigarette. Henderson's lips were moist. A gun belt was visible under the skirts of his coat and the barrel of the gun banged against the drawer of the desk.

"Buck Dalton was here in my road ranch?" Henderson finally asked.

"Sure thing," Grady declared promptly. Then he explained how he had come to blows with the renegade in Kearney and with what results.

As Henderson looked at the frontiersman his face appeared to mirror new respect. "So this fellow Slim Burdick was a friend of Dalton's," he said. "Then the other two fellows must have been members of his gang, too. I'll have to look into this. I get a lot of good business from the Overland Mail Stages, and I wouldn't want anyone to be menacing the vehicles. You can understand that."

Henderson was on his feet now. Grady saw that his well cut trousers were funneled into highly polished half-boots.

"Have you eaten yet, Mr. Grady?" Henderson asked.

When Walt said he hadn't, Henderson invited his guest to join him in a meal. They went out of the office together. A young fellow came up to Henderson and took his order. Then the road ranch proprietor headed for the bar and signaled for two drinks.

When the bartender came over with glasses and a bottle, Henderson asked: "Roddy, did you hear anything about a hold-up on the stage road?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Henderson," Roddy replied. "Happened four or five days ago, down south of the ferry. It must have been about the time you were away to Beaver City. I thought you knew; Sparrow Bailey was telling me about it when he came through on the southbound stage."

This verification of Grady's story appeared to satisfy Henderson because he said promptly: "Make yourself acquainted with Walt Grady. He

was the waddy who took care of the stage robbers. Gunned down one of them, salivated another one, and rounded up the third."

"I'm not asking for all the credit," Walt said quickly. "High Pockets Haley did a chore on one of them, and Pop Farrell was slinging a bit of lead, too."

"What happened to them hombres?" Roddy inquired, anxious to have first-hand information for the customers who would inevitably ask him about it later.

"Slim Burdick is feeding the worms," Walt Grady replied calmly. "Dan Purdue and Pecos Porter are down at the cavalry post at Kearney. Porter is shot up bad."

"Any of them names familiar to you?" Henderson asked the bartender.

The drink dispenser licked his lips. "I don't reckon I've ever heard tell of any of them."

GRADY had been watching the reaction of the men in the room when the names were mentioned. Even though the bartender and the boss might not admit acquaintance, the frontiersman was certain that there were others at the Henderson Road Ranch who had met up with Porter, Purdue and Burdick.

Henderson was still talking, however. He said: "Grady here seems to think these fellows were a part of the Buck Dalton gang. I thought Dalton and his boys were working farther north and west. Know anything about that, Roddy?"

A flicker of amazement crossed Roddy's features. He looked at Walt, then asked: "Are you sure about this Dalton business, mister?"

"I ought to be." Grady's fingers went over his face and touched several black and blue marks. He chuckled. "These are samples of a brush with Buck Dalton up at the Border House in Kearney. I'm not likely to forget that very easily. Besides, I saw Buck Dalton heading south with five of his men early this morning."

"Grady seems to think Dalton might have stopped here for a meal."

"So that's who those men were," Roddy remarked. "They came in here about two o'clock this afternoon. Their horses were sure ridden into the ground. They didn't say much, but from what they did say, I got the idea that they were waddies from the C Bar B Ranch."

"The Bowden spread?" Henderson responded. "That could be, too. Old Carse Bowden has plenty of hombres on his payroll, and they'd have to be plenty tough to stand all the guff he hands out to them. That must be the answer. The place where them three hombres hit the Overland was right down near the Bowden spread, too."

Grady didn't know enough about the surrounding country and its people to be able to evaluate this new bit of information properly. It would be something to discuss with the Farrells when he jogged along to their place.

The boy came over to inform Henderson that his supper was ready, and the road ranch proprietor headed for a table in one corner of the barroom. He and Grady brought their drinks with them and took their seats.

"If you're the sort of a hombre who's willing to stand up against a fellow like Buck Dalton I'd like to have you on my payroll," Henderson said a while later.

"Thanks for the offer," Grady replied, "but I've got other plans. I'm going to start a little spread of my own down south of the Republican River. Maybe we'll be neighbors."

Henderson weighed this information as though not exactly pleased with it. "What made you decide about your spread all of a sudden?"

"You might say that I'm a sort of impetuous fellow," Walt replied with a laugh. "I see something I want and go after it right quick!"

"I know a youngster that got hold of the wrong end of a hot branding iron that way once," Henderson said soberly.

"What do you mean?" Walt asked.

"You're right in one thing," Henderson declared. "We've got a swell country out here, and we want to get the right kind of people into it. I have big interests here, and I fancy myself as something of a patriarch, in spite of my years. I've got big plans for the country between Beaver City and Kearney, and I like to work with people. I'm interested in making friends."

"Meaning?" Grady prompted.

"Meaning that the land down between the Republican and Beaver City wouldn't be worth a hill of beans if I hadn't invited the Overland Mail to run their coaches through here. I'm bucking some plenty tough opposition from Carse Bowen, but when I get the right kind of settlers in there I have a hunch that Bowden will see that he's not the big auger he thinks he is."

"I'm glad you told me about Bowden," Grady said. "And about having friends on the land—that's a good idea. I think I'll enjoy being your friend. But when it comes to doing things for the country, I'd say that Pop Farrell and his daughter ought to get a lot of credit too. Without them and their ferry, your stage route and the Overland Mail wouldn't be worth a load of buckshot."

"Exactly," chuckled Arthur Henderson. "It's an important link. That is the main reason why I financed the Farrells and helped them to get their ferry into operation."

Grady was hardly prepared for this announcement. The thought that someone aside from the Farrells might have put up the financial backing for the ferry had never entered his mind.

"How did you happen to pick on the Farrells?" Grady asked curiously.

Henderson wiped his mouth carefully, then leaned back in his chair and replied. "Have you met Daisy Farrell?"

"Oh, yes," Walt replied promptly.

"Then you know," Henderson said simply.



IT WAS almost nine o'clock by the time Grady had his last drink and went out to the stable to rig his Ulysses horse. Apparently no one at the Henderson place was unduly interested in his departure. He waved good-bye to the hostler, turned into the stage trail and cantered away. The journey to the Farrell cabin was a short one, and not more than twenty minutes later Grady was slowing his mount there. He spotted the ferry tied up at the wharf below the cabin and knew that both the girl and her father were at home.

Walt Grady swung down. The sounds of hoofbeats had penetrated to the pair in the house, and Daisy came to the door.

Daisy hurried forward with a delighted cry, and Grady swung Ulysses into the small corral behind the Farrell cabin.

"Let's go inside," Daisy suggested. "Father has been worrying about you ever since you went up over the hill with the stagecoach."

"Is your father the only one who has been worrying?" Walt inquired simply.

"Silly goose!" the girl declared. Then she was climbing the two steps to the small veranda and pushing open the door to the cabin. "It's Walt Grady," she told her father. "He's come back."

Pop Farrell turned around from where he had been seated on a bench near a crude board table. He stood up and extended a hand to Walt in greeting.

"How are things in Kearney?" he asked simply.

Grady told him about the incidents at the post, and how the arrival of the stage robbers had been hailed. He mentioned his meeting with the outlaw Buck Dalton, and was a bit

embarrassed when Daisy ran her fingers over the bruises on his face, looked at the cut and roughened knuckles and insisted on doing something for them.

"Did Buck Dalton and his men go through here today?" Grady asked.

"I don't know Buck Dalton," Pop Farrell replied. "But I did take six horsemen across the river at about four o'clock this afternoon. They paid their fees without squawking and didn't make me no trouble."

"Art Henderson seemed to think that Buck Dalton and his boys might be working on the C Bar S. Said that Porter, Purdue and Burdick were probably working there, too, when they robbed the stage!"

"Nonsense," Pop Farrell burst out. "If they were working on the C Bar B, they wouldn't head for the Republican River after the hold-up. There would be no reason for them to cross the river at all."

"You're right," Walt said seriously. "And there are some things I would like to clear up too. I stopped at the Henderson Road Ranch on the way back from Kearney, hoping I might be able to learn something about Pecos Porter, Dan Purdue and Slim Burdick. They claimed that they knew nothing about them."

Daisy Farrell looked at her father. "Did you talk to Henderson himself?" she asked Grady.

"I did," Walt replied calmly.

"Didn't he know any of the stage robbers?"

"He said he didn't," Grady declared.

THE FERRY tender's daughter got up from the raw-hide-bottomed chair in which she had been sitting and walked over to the window that looked out on the winding road. Walt studied her casually, and was aware that she was struggling with some serious problem.

"Just what is your relation with Arthur Henderson?" he demanded.

Daisy stiffened, but did not turn around to face either her father or the frontiersman.

"Henderson put up the money I

needed to buy this ferry and get it going," Farrell replied promptly. "I'm paying him back as soon as I can."

Grady nodded. "How much do you owe Henderson?" he asked.

"Four thousand dollars," Pop replied slowly. Daisy Farrell came over to the frontiersman and seated herself on a bench at his feet. Then she looked up into his eyes and asked:

"What are you thinking, Walt?"

"I was trying to figure a way to repay Henderson," Grady replied frankly. "From my conversation with him, I'd say that he has big ambitions for this country, and you're likely to be nothing but a couple of pawns in his plans. He's counting a lot on this ferry."

"Pawns?" Daisy Farrell repeated the word with a sigh. Then she looked at Grady and said: "I think he expected me to be something more than a pawn. He said something about a queen." She lowered her head and looked into the flickering flames that were being drawn up the chimney by the cool air outside.

Walt Grady nodded. There was no need for further conversation on that subject. Finally Pop Farrell asked: "What are your plans, son?"

"I'm taking up a homestead on the height of land between here and Beaver City. I've filed for the section that interest me."

"That's splendid," Pop Farrell declared. "We'll help you with it all we can. But you won't want to go down there until morning. You can bunk here for the night."

Grady accepted the offer thankfully, and after some other conversation they all retired. Grady had hoped to have a chance to talk to Daisy alone, but this opportunity did not present itself.

Even after he went to bed, however, Walt did not immediately fall asleep. He was trying to work out some method by which he might be able to pay the debt for the Farrells and relieve them of any responsibility to Henderson.

When he first came into the country he had had a little more than a thousand dollars in the money belt he wore about his middle. With

the reward money that had come to him from the Overland Mail for the handling of the stage bandits, he could well afford to pay off the indebtedness. But this would leave him with little more than his horse and his own two hands to develop his homestead. And felt certain responsibility to Tex Cronin and his two pards.

The ferry problem would have to wait until some time in the future.

IT WAS about ten o'clock in the morning when Walt said goodbye to Daisy and led his sorrel onto the ferryboat. Pop Farrell released the tie rope and swung the wheel that let the boat drift out into the current that would carry it at an angle across the Republican River. Walt discovered that when the river was fractious, as it sometimes was, the mules Daisy mentioned were used to tow the ferry across the stream.

The frontiersman and the ferry tender were silent for the first few minutes of their journey across the upper end of the gorge. Then Pop Farrell smiled and said: "I think Daisy has taken a hankering for you. That's dangerous for a young fellow."

"For me?" Walt said in surprise. "I thought she had some sort of an understanding with Arthur Henderson."

"Not so's you could notice it," Pop Farrell replied crisply. "I know she treats him nice, because she thinks she owes it to me; but there's nothing romantic about it, I'll promise you that."

Grady didn't press the matter any further, but when he finally said farewell to Pop Farrell, mounted his horse, and headed along the trail to Beaver City, there was a new lightness in his heart. He was whistling a cheery song and Ulysses appeared to be keeping time with the rataplan of his hoofs.

An hour's canter from the ferry brought Walt to the site he had selected for his spread. It was on a height of land and looked down upon the point where the stage trail moved through a pass. The slopes on either side were covered with lush grass, and at one corner of his section there

was a grove of trees that would supply sufficient timber for a sturdy cabin, and promised firewood for many years to come if properly husbanded.

Walt swung in onto his property, descended from his horse and led him toward a stream of ice cold water that came down from springs higher up on his land, meandered over rocks and formed small, singing riffles. They both drank from the cooling creek; then Walt Grady looked over his domain.

From his saddle pocket he took the notes he had used in filling out the papers for the governor. With these as a basis he stepped off his lines and set up his markers. This took him the greater part of the day, and he was tired and happy when darkness finally closed in about him.

Walt set out his soogans, picketed his horse, and turned in for his first night on his own ranch.

The new rancher slept peacefully and was not disturbed until the sound of singing birds and the scurrying of small animals in the tall grass awakened him. Ulysses was greeting the morning sun with a loud neigh, and Walt Grady chuckled at the picture of rural happiness.

"So you like to get up with the sun, do you?" he remarked. Ulysses shook his head. Then the intelligent animal ambled away in the direction of the creek. Walt built his breakfast in the fireplace he had constructed the previous day, and set about making his breakfast. Then he laid out the shape of the cabin he was going to build, staked the corners and set about constructing the dwelling.

He was whistling a pleasant tune when he heard a horseman approaching him. Grady looked up and saw a tall, sharp-featured cowboy. The man was dressed in a leather jacket, wore woollen breeches in half-boots and leather chaps over them. His heels were marked by long Spanish type spurs, and over his piercing eyes there edged the brim of a broad Stetson.

"Howdy, stranger," Walt Grady greeted him pleasantly. "Light and rest your saddle!"

THE NEWCOMER ignored the usual cowboy invitation and remained in his saddle. He looked down at Grady and remarked: "I'm not a stranger, mister. I'm the foreman of the C Bar B, the biggest cattle spread in these parts. I'm plumb curious about your plans here. Judging from that fireplace, and the foundation you're laying there, I'd say you were planning to take root here."

"That's about it," Grady replied. "I'm figuring on doing a bit of ranching hereabouts."

"Mister," the foreman declared, "you're making a big mistake if you think you'll be able to buck Carse Bowden. He ain't going to like the idea of no shirt-tail rancher running cattle on the C Bar B."

"The name's Walt Grady," Grady remarked calmly, "and right now you're not on the C Bar B. This here is my spread, and I'm figuring on doing some grazing on government land, with the proper leases and all. Any objections?"

Until now Walt had been hunkered down on his thighs, adjusting one of the logs. Now, however, he straightened up. He adjusted his gun belt, swung his weapon forward and loosened the pistol in its sheath.

"I'm Gil Reese," the foreman replied. "I'm segundo for Carse Bowden, and when I say something the boss backs me up. I'm plumb interested in your spread and your leases. Is Arthur Henderson trying to run a sandy on us?"

"Henderson?" Grady was puzzled. "I don't reckon I get what you're driving at."

"Aren't you one of the gunnies Henderson has sent down to make trouble for us?" Reese inquired.

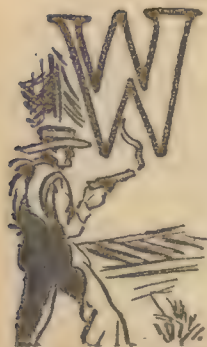
"I never set eyes on Henderson until yesterday," Walt said truthfully, "and I ain't sure yet whether I like what I saw."

Gil Reese digested this information as he swung off his horse on the side away from Grady. Something in the glitter of his eyes served as a warning to the cowboy, and when Reese came around his bay with a six-gun in his fist. Grady's weapon was also leveled.

"Climb back aboard your mount, Reese," Grady said calmly. "I'll match my drop against yours any day. Right now I need you to take a message to that range hog boss of yours. Tell him that if I find any C Bar B cattle on my range, I'll charge him for the feed. That's one way I plan to make this spread pay, by fattening up cattle for Kansas City and St. Louis."

Seeing that he had been out-guessed, Gil Reese returned his gun to its holster with poor grace. Then he climbed back aboard his horse, wheeled around and called back over his shoulder: "You'll be seeing me, mister. And the next time it'll be through gunsmoke."

Grady held his gun in a firm grip as Gil Reese crossed the stage road and galloped into the timber on the far side.



WALT worked industriously for the next couple of days. Late in the morning of the fourth day, he heard the sound of a wagon approaching, and a few minutes later Daisy Farrell came in sight with the mules and the wagon. He greeted her pleasantly with: "This is no job for a woman. You'll have to be the straw boss and sit by while I do the work."

"Not on your life," Daisy assured him. "I came down here to help out, and I'm going to do just that."

Walt didn't expect too much from the girl, but she surprised him. Obviously she must have done a good deal of the buildings at the ferry house, for she knew about short cuts and ways of making things stretch that would never have occurred to Walt ordinarily.

The building of the cabin was moving along at a rapid pace. In the middle of the afternoon the north-bound

stage came along and slowed up. There was a new driver on the box, but High Pockets Haley was still swinging the shotgun. He climbed down and called: "How are you doing, Walt?"

"Fine and dandy," Walt replied. "Any news?"

"Sure thing," Haley told him. "There's a waddy name of Tex Cronin waiting up in Kearney with two of his friends, a couple of nice-looking boys named Jim Raynor and Rimfire Halley. They figure that you ain't going to have no work for them without cattle, so they're hankering to drive a herd down this way. How about it?"

"Are there any cattle to be had in Kearney?" Grady asked.

"Sure thing," Haley told him. "With the troops moving west to Fort Hall, Fort Vancouver and them other posts, Colonel Quinn is going to have quite a few head that won't do him any good. I reckon you could pick them up cheap."

Grady passed over some of his money to Haley and said, "Give this money to Cronin. Tell him to pick up the cattle and drive them down here. I'll be looking for him in a week or two. Don't chouse all the tallow off them steers; we don't want to do the same job twice."

"Keno," agreed High Pockets. "Good luck to you."

He climbed back aboard the coach, the jehu whipped up the animals and the Overland moved off in the direction of the ferry.

"Your cattle!" Daisy said. "It has such a nice sound to it, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," Grady agreed. "It might sound even better if you'd said: 'Our cattle.'"

Daisy blushed. Then she looked about her and replied: "I'd better be getting back with the mules and the wagon. But I'll be coming up to help you again."

Walt watched her as she drove off down the road. There was a song in his heart, but somehow his lips were dry when he tried to whistle or hum it.

ABOUT TEN days after his arrival on his homestead Walt had a completely unexpected visitor. "Hello, Grady," the road ranch owner greeted him. "How are things coming along?"

"First rate," Grady told him.

"Had any visits from the C Bar B?" Henderson asked.

"Gil Reese dropped in on the second day I was here," Grady told him. "He made a few threats, but I haven't seen him since."

"He's probably waiting for Carse Bowden to come back to the ranch," Henderson explained. "I understand Carse is down East to Topeka, or some such place. He's trying to make some sort of a deal with the railroads."

"Good for him," Walt replied. "That will give me time to get things straightened out here."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it," Henderson responded. "I was wondering whether you were going to go ahead here. If you are, I'd like to have an interest in this place. I have plenty of money to invest, you know."

"So I hear," Grady declared. "But at the moment I think I'm able to swing things by myself."

Arthur Henderson shook his head slowly. He was seated on a crude bench that Walt had constructed, and his keen eyes roved about the ranch yard and saw the improvements that were gradually taking shape. Finally he lighted a cigar, got it going and remarked:

"Folks around here have their own ideas about squatters. That's why I'd like to see you with the law on your side before Bowden comes back. Otherwise you wouldn't have a leg to stand on if Reese and the boys came up here and tried to burn you out."

"I don't like squatters myself," Walt declared, deliberately misunderstanding Henderson.

"I've got some pretty clever lawyers who do work for me up at Kearney and down in Beaver City," the road ranch proprietor declared. "May-

be you'd like me to handle things for you."

"If I do, I'll let you know," Grady told him.

Henderson had to be content with this. He decided to try another tack. "I understand from folks up north that you have a cattle herd coming down here."

"That's right," Grady declared. "I'm going to run my own herd and I'm thinking of taking on some cattle from the Texas trail herds to graze here and fatten them for the stock yards and slaughterhouses. They'll travel cheap on the new railroads."

Henderson whistled. "You're sure tromping on Bowden's toes," he remarked. "That's just the idea that he's been working on, and I figure his trip to Topeka has something to do with it. Me, I don't go in for cattle so Bowden don't interfere with me."

"Thanks for the tip," Walt said. "I figure I'll be able to take care of myself. I'm not anticipating any trouble from Bowden or his boys."

Henderson took his leave soon afterward and Grady watched him go down the road toward the ferry. He realized that Henderson knew nothing of the papers Grady had filed with the governor, and was therefore not taking Grady's settlement too seriously.

TWO NIGHTS later Walt was sleeping in the ranch house when he heard a loud whinny from Ulysses out in the stable that adjoined the corral.

Grady slipped out of his bed, kicked his feet into his boots and headed for the door. His six-gun was in his fist, and the hammer was cocked. For once he was glad that the door was not yet on the new building, for it made it possible for him to slip out into the darkness without any possibility of squeaking hinges betraying him.

Over in the direction of the stable with its sod roof, he saw the outline of a moving figure. There was a

spark of flame as the man struck a match, and his long hand moved the twist of dried grass that he held.

"Hold on there!" shouted Grady. "What are you doing?"

The man whirled around. One hand held the smoldering torch while the other hand darted toward his hip. Walt waited until the fellow brought up his weapon; then he triggered his own gun. There was a scream of pain from the would-be arsonist; then the man ran around the corner of the stable shed and disappeared into the darkness. A few moments later there came the sound of a galloping horse.

Walt decided that it would be a hopeless task to chase the man. Fifteen minutes later he was back in the house and resuming his interrupted sleep, convinced that his night-prowling enemy was gone.

The next week went by uneventfully, and then on the afternoon of the eighth day Daisy Farrell came galloping up on her mule wagon and called to him:

"They're coming! They're coming!"

"Who's coming?" Walt asked.

"The cattle," Daisy told him enthusiastically. "They're at the ferry. Father can't get them all on the boat at once, so he's going to make a couple of trips."

"Ferry?" Walt inquired in amazement. "What kind of cattle am I getting? Can't they swim the Republican River?"

"They probably can," agreed the girl, "but Father wouldn't hear of it. He said you'd done a lot for him, and the least he could do was see that your cows got to you in good shape. You don't realize how swift the current is in that river. The cows might be swept down into the gorge and right over the falls."

Walt Grady nodded his understanding. Then he climbed into the buckboard alongside the girl and said: "Now that you've brought me the good news, maybe we ought to go back and help Tex and the boys

with the cattle. We can turn them onto my land down near the ferry. We don't need to bring them all the way up here in the hills."

"I never thought of that," the girl declared. She handed him the reins, and Walt turned the mule team back into the stage road and headed it for the ferry.

TEX CRONIN was riding point, and he was almost three miles from the ferry when they met up with him. He reined his horse alongside the buckboard and called out: "Hello, Boss. Here's your dogies!"

"Good for you, Tex," Grady greeted him. "How was the trip down?"

"No trouble at all," Tex Cronin told him. "There were some pretty tough-looking hombres on the veranda at that Henderson place when we came by, but they didn't do anything but make wisecracks, and we're tough enough to let them roll off our hides. This is sure some country you've got down here. When do we hit your spread?"

"You're on my spread right now," Walt told him, "and the area between me and the river is Government graze on which I'm getting leases. So you can turn them hay burners and grass munchers right into the graze now."

Tex nodded, then turned to gallop back to the swing where Jim Raynor and Rimfire Halley were sashaying along at a leisurely pace. Walt and the girl watched as the dogies moved off into the grass and began munching contentedly. Grady watched the animals as they swung down off the buckboard and went over to study one of them. There was a large C with two inverted Vs on the left rear flank of each beast.

"You mean these were all one herd when you picked them up?" he asked Tex Cronin when the smiling Texas waddy came back.

"Not on your tintype," Cronin declared. He reached back over his shoulder and lifted out what looked like an Indian arrow quiver. From this he brought out two branding irons and passed them over to his

boss. "Mr. Grady," he said proudly, "let me be the first to congratulate you. You are now the boss of the Flying G."

Walt Grady studied the branding irons and saw that they bore the same device that was on the flanks of the cattle. Tex Cronin took a batch of papers from his saddle bag and passed them to Grady.

"Figgering how the Flying G might not be sending folks up to Kearney too frequent, I went down to the post office and picked up your mail. Then I went to the brand agent and registered your brand for you. I didn't know how the neighbors would feel about unbranded dogies running around. Sometimes a thing like that is a temptation. I don't like to tempt honest folks; and the dishonest ones—well, you know how it is."

Walt laughed. He ran through the papers, which included the recorded claims for his section; the leases for the Government graze and the other papers which the governor had promised to put through for him. Besides, there was a personal letter from the governor wishing him luck on his new ranch and offering him any further help he might need.

"That's the kind of a friend to have," Daisy Farrell declared.

"I'm lucky all around when it comes to friends," Walt said frankly.

10



WEEK after the arrival of Tex Cronin and the cattle, Walt was attending to his chores. He still had some carpentry work to do, and usually one of the cowboys was around the ranchhouse to help him.

This morning his companion was Rimfire Halley.

Cronin was away, and Jim Raynor was chousing the cattle about the home range. While Walt and Rimfire were eating their breakfast the Texan

looked out of the window and down across the prairie. He looked at Grady and said: "Boss, it sure looks like we're having company, and plenty of it."

Walt leaned forward and followed the pointing finger of the cowboy. About a half-mile away, beyond the stage road, he saw a group of horsemen. One of those in the lead he recognized as Gil Reese; beside him on a large Morgan horse there rode a huge figure which could only be Carse Bowden. Four other riders were behind them.

Grady chuckled, then rose from his chair, pushed it back carefully and donned his gun belt. Rimfire Halley, who was handier with a rifle as his name indicated, pulled a Winchester from a scabbard that hung on a wall peg and followed Grady to the door. The owner of the Flying G stepped out into the clearing in front of his ranchhouse and called: "Howdy, friends. Light down and come in."

The six riders reined to a halt. Carse Bowden and Gil Reese remained together studying the pair of cowmen before them. The other four waddies, at a nod from their boss, were sidling to left and right. No one spoke for several minutes. Finally Gil one of them. There was a large G Bar B and said: "See what I mean, Boss?"

"I do," replied Bowden in clipped tones. "And I don't like it at all."

Reese accepted this as a signal that he was to take further action. He swung down from his horse, walked toward Walt Grady and, when he was about six feet in front of him, said: "You were mighty uppity the last time I was here. I was willing to let things ride because the boss was away. Now, however, I'm back here with a little more power behind me, and I'm telling you that we don't like trespassers on the C Bar B."

"I don't blame you," Walt replied calmly. "If I were in your boots, I'd be plumb anxious to keep folks off my home spread, too. It so happens, however, that this ain't the C Bar B!"

Gil Reese puffed up like a pouter pigeon. Out of the corner of his eye he checked the positions of his men,

"This range you're standing on is the Flying G," Grady told him emphatically. "If you happen to take a gander off in that direction and your eyes are sharp, you'll see my cattle roaming about with the brand on their flanks. Any objections, Mister?"

Carse Bowden shifted in his saddle, looked in the direction in which Grady pointed and his eyes narrowed.

"Just because a land-grabber jumps a man's graze with a herd of cattle don't make him a rancher, not in this country," Bowden retorted.

"Mebbe not," agreed Grady, "but when a man has papers to prove it, then it's an entirely different matter."

As he spoke, Walt fumbled in his shirt and brought out a batch of documents wrapped in an oiled piece of cloth. He spread these out in front of Gil Reese, and Carse Bowden bent over to look at them.

"This is a deed for my part of the range here, which runs along both sides of the trail. I have papers for some of the boys who are working here with me. Then there's a lease on state and federal lands which run along the south bank of the Republican River. I think you'll find them all in good order."

BOWDEN studied them at some length. Then he straightened up and blew his breath through the bristles of his mustache.

"Another one of Henderson's dirty tricks to move south of the river," Bowden declared.

"Mister, you're wrong there," Grady insisted. "I don't have any truck with Arthur Henderson or any other hombre in this country. I'm doing my best to make a future for myself, and I'd admire to have you for good neighbors."

Gil Reese was still studying the papers. Suddenly he threw them down on the ground. Grady's jaw tightened. He knew that this gesture was deliberately intended to provoke him. But he was playing a cautious game. He took one step forward, bent as if to pick up the papers and saw

that Gil Reese's hand moved to his hip.

He didn't know whether the C Bar B foreman intended to beef him with the pistol barrel or shoot him down in cold blood. In either case, he didn't like the gesture at all. Instead of completing his gesture toward the scattered documents, Grady's fingers curled into a fist and came upward from the ground with all the tough, sinewy force of his one hundred and ninety pounds. The impact against Reese's jaw was like that of a pole-ax on a steer. Reese's half drawn gun dropped to the ground from loosened fingers and a gasp of amazement came from the lips of the ranch owner and his four waddies.

"I don't like a man who draws on me in my own back yard," Grady said simply. This time he bent for the papers while Rimfire Halley strode forward, and there was no doubt about his intentions with the Winchester.

Realizing apparently for the first time since he had ridden into the yard that this conversation with his neighbor was not going to be as simple as he had anticipated, Carse Bowden adopted an ingratiating attitude and said: "I'm afraid my friend Reese is a bit abrupt. I'm sure if he had realized that you and your men were legally on this land he would not have been as brusque as he was. I'm curious about what you plan to do with all this good graze. Perhaps you'd like to cut some hay for me and sell me the winter graze I need."

"I don't reckon we'll be able to do that, Mr. Bowden," Grady declared affably. "I'm figuring on buying up some of the Texas herds that are coming up the trail to the railroad. I'll feed them and fatten them here and then ship them to Chicago or St. Louis."

Bowden bristled again. "Then you're in out and out competition with me; I won't tolerate it!"

"Take it easy, mister," Grady said calmly. "There are plenty of beef cattle coming up the Texas Trail, and I reckon a good many of them are too scrawny to interest the beef buyers. There's bound to be enough for

both the Flying G and the C Bar B. Why fight about it?"

While the two ranchmen were talking, one of the Bowden cowboys dismounted and went to help Gil Reese. The foreman still couldn't realize what had happened to him, and he raised no objection when he was steered toward his horse and helped into the saddle. Grady studied the sharp-featured Bowden, then said: "Speaking of hay and cattle, Mr. Bowden, I reckon there might be times when I could give you a neighborly hand with either one. If you figure you need help, just let me know, and I'll come a-riding!"

"Harrumph!" snorted Carse Bowden. Then he gathered up the reins on his big Morgan horse, swung the animal about and cantered out of the yard. Rimfire Halley came up to stand beside his boss. They both watched until the C Bar B was out of sight over a knoll on the far side of the stage road; then Halley burst out laughing.

"That big buffalo sure stampeded in here expecting trouble, but I don't reckon he liked the brand he got. You've sure made a real enemy out of Gil Reese now."

"That man's a born enemy; there's no point in fooling around with him. Let's get back to our chores."

Rimfire Halley nodded. He took the rifle into the house, then came out and went about his business.

DURING THE next couple of weeks some of Cronin's friends arrived from Texas. One of them, with two companions, brought along a herd of two hundred head they had picked up at the railhead at Hays Kansas, and Grady agreed to graze them on the Flying G on shares.

While there had been no trouble from the C Bar B of late, Grady did not minimize the forces that were aligned against him. He kept in touch with things at Beaver City and Kearney by conversations with High Pockets Haley and Sparrow Bailey as the coaches went through on their regular bi-weekly runs.

One afternoon the stage came to a stop at the water trough just inside

the ranch gate and Haley hailed the house. Walt Grady was there alone, and he came out to talk to the driver and the shotgun guard.

Besides the men on the box, he saw a flash of color inside the coach itself. A smiling face peered out at him, and he saw that it belonged to a stunning blonde girl dressed in a velvet traveling cloak and holding a hatbox on her lap.

"Could I have a drink of that ice-cold water?" the girl asked in a musical voice. "I'm sure I need it almost as much as those horses. This is a downright dusty road you have here."

Walt Grady was taken by surprise, but he regained his aplomb almost immediately. Rinsing out the tin cup that hung alongside the water tank, he dipped up a drink and carried it to the girl.

High Pockets Haley chuckled, and remarked: "Miss Millard is sure enough going to make things hum in this country."

"Are you staying with us, Miss Millard?" Grady inquired.

"Oh, yes," she replied pleasantly. "I have a very attractive offer from a Mister Arthur Henderson. I'm going to sing and dance at his hotel."

Grady's mouth dropped open.

"I hope you'll be very successful there," he replied promptly. "I'm sure you will."

"Will I be seeing you and your boys there?" Arline Millard asked with a coquettish nod of her head.

"Why not?" Grady agreed. "Arthur Henderson is a good friend of mine."

High Pockets Haley coughed, shifted his chewing tobacco from one jaw to the other and observed: "This here coach is running on a schedule, ma'am. We'd better be getting along or old Pop Farrell will be sending for the cavalry."

Arline Millard waved farewell. The driver gathered up his ribbons and clucked to the horses, and the Beaver City-Kearney coach moved northward.

Jim Raynor came out of the new bunkhouse that Walt Grady was having built on the place to accommodate the cowboys who had been added to his ranch, and the Texas waddy

whistled a cheery tune.

"That's shore some filly," he remarked. "You had your eyes bugged out so you could knock them off with a prod pole. Is that good?"

"Maybe!" Walt Grady said cryptically. "But I don't want you and the boys heading for the Henderson Road Ranch until you've finished your work, hereabouts!"

Jim Raynor guffawed. "Skirts ain't for me, Boss. I don't reckon they'd take a second look in my direction. The only she-stock I'm interested in is roaming around on our grass here."

Walt chuckled.

THAT EVENING, the boys who were not on night herd gathered around the heavily groaning board in the bunkhouse. Jim Raynor made his report on the new blonde. Then Walt announced: "There was another piece of news that Highpockets Haley brought along with him. Apparently he didn't want Miss Millard to know he was telling me, because he tucked it into the mail he carried in from Beaver City."

Grady unfolded a grimy bit of paper with the patient scrawl of the shotgun guard clearly visible on its rough surface and passed it around the table.

Tex Cronin took it and read it aloud:

Walt:

I figgered yuh might like to know that Buck Dalton and his gun-hung hombres are down to Beaver City. They're doing a heap of loud talking and making some wild threats. I heerd tell that they're fixing to go north sometime next week to see can they horn in on the hanging of Pecos Porter and Dan Purdue. I still can't savvy why that saw-bones at Kearney patched up Porter so they could hang him. The fellow is so plumb pizen hisself that he could have curled up and died without no help from a rope.

Haley.

This bit of information stirred up more comment than the unexpected arrival of the girl in the Republican River country. Several of the trail drive cowboys who knew little or nothing about the stage hold-up were briefed on the earlier happenings, and Cronin remarked: "Buck Dalton figures that Walt here is to blame for these doings, and he also has a personal score to settle with him."

"That's not the main thing that's bothering me," Grady remarked. "It's that Buck Dalton has been around this country for quite a while now, doing nothing. He doesn't keep a bunch of gun-hung hombres without some kind of money to pay their expenses. Who's ponying up the dinero?"

11



GRADY was rigging Ulysses, a short while later, and was following the stage trail toward the Republican River as the moon came up and painted the prairie with silver.

When he came over the rim of the rock break that provided access to the ferry in the gorge, Grady saw the light in the window of the Farrell house on the far side of the stream. And down below on the south shore, he spotted a gleam of light that could only be the puffing pipe of Pop Farrell.

Ulysses took the downgrade with bunched feet and finally came to the log ramp that led to the ferry. Pop Grady was seated on his rocking chair and puffing contentedly on his briar.

"Howdy, Pop!" Grady greeted him. "Looking for business?"

"Sure thing," Pop Farrell replied. "I figured that with that painted hussy going through on the stage this afternoon, the C Bar B and the Flying G would be skallyhooting along this trail tonight, and business would be right pert."

"Painted hussy?" Grady remarked. "How do you figure that Miss Millard is a painted hussy? Have you been looking into her past?"

"Past my aunt!" snorted Pop Farrell. "I don't have to look into the past of no filly to find out whether she's a hell hound or plumb gentle."

Walt Grady wanted to burst out laughing at the vehemence of the oldtimer, but he realized that this was a very serious matter for him.

"Maybe you're right," he agreed, "but I have a hunch that every young fellow in the neighborhood is going to want to find it out for himself. I don't reckon they'll let you stop them either."

Pop Farrell knocked the dottle out of his pipe. The sparks dropped down into the water beside the ferry and sizzled out. Then the old man and the young one were throwing off the ropes, and bending their shoulders to the windlass that would pull the ferry out into the running water and set up the motion that would carry it along the cables to the far shore.

"You'd better walk your horse past my place until you get on the road to Henderson's," Farrell said grimly as they approached the north bank.

"So that's why you're riled up," Grady said calmly. "What gave you the idea that I'd be heading for Henderson's?"

Pop Farrell sniffed. "You ain't made no different from them other high-pockets hombres you got working for you, now air you?"

"I reckon not," Grady agreed, "but I figure maybe I don't have to go hunting no new fillies."

Pop Farrell was somewhat appeased, and let the subject drop.

At the Farrell place, Walt remarked on it to Daisy Farrell. "The old boy sure don't like any competition for you, does he?"

"Competition for me?" Daisy asked. "How do you mean?"

"He seems to think that we're all going to jump at Arline Millard."

"Is that her name?" Daisy asked with some interest. "How did you find that out?"

"The coach stopped at the ranch

to water the horses; Haley introduced me to the girl."

Daisy Farrell ventured no comment on this simple statement.

"How are you making out with Arthur Henderson?" Walt inquired.

Daisy shook her head. A flush climbed up into her cheeks. Then she said: "I don't know. He was over here the other night and asked me to marry him. I told him I couldn't give him an answer right away. Then he was outside talking to Father and he wanted to know when we would be able to pay back the loan he advanced us for the ferry."

"Sort of putting on the pressure," Grady declared. "What did your father tell him?"

"I don't know," Daisy said frankly. "I've known Arthur long enough to figure his angle. He knows that Father will tell me about his financial troubles, and then maybe I'll fall into Arthur's arms like a ripe peach."

"You're a peach, all right," Walt declared, "but somehow I don't exactly see you falling into Henderson's arms."

DAISSY FARRELL smiled; then Walt suddenly stiffened. Out in the night he heard the sound of a fast-galloping horse. It was coming from the north and was making real time on the hard-packed stage road.

"Someone is sure fogging along that road!" Grady declared.

The man and the girl rose to their feet and headed for the door. They heard the footsteps of Pop Farrell on the boat and knew that he would be coming forward with the red lantern he habitually carried at night.

Grady stepped out on the little veranda first, and looked up the north trail. The horse that was approaching bunched its feet just before it hit the water and came to a sliding stop. A man threw himself off the horse and came staggering up to Walt Grady.

"That you, Boss?" he demanded, his eyes squinting in the light of the doorway.

"It's me, all right, Jim. What's happened?"

"Someone stabbed Rimfire Halley at the Henderson Road Ranch!" de-

clared Raynor. "I reckon you ought to get up there, Boss."

"Someone? Who's someone?" Walt asked grimly as he strode toward the lean-to stable and began to tighten the cinches on his Ulysses horse.

"I don't rightly know. But Tex Cronin and Art Henderson are holding him. I figured you'd be here, so I came down to bring you back."

Walt Grady planted a kiss on Daisy's upturned lips; then he was swinging aboard his horse. He made time along the north trail and left Jim Raynor far behind him on his tired mount. It was not many minutes before the lighted windows of the Henderson Road Ranch came into view and through the large front panes he could see that there was a curious suspension of activity.

The usual murmur of voices was lacking. There were no sounds of clicking chips and tinkling glassware.

The backs of a number of men were visible through the windows. Grady swirled up to the hitch rack in a cloud of dust, dropped his reins over the bar and high-heeled up onto the wooden porch. He hunched his gun forward from force of habit and pushed through the doors into the building.

Several men turned to look at him as he strode in. The first thing he saw was a pair of deal tables that had been pushed together to form an improvised bed. Across the tables was sprawled the figure of Rimfire Halley. His shirt was off and a long red wound was visible down the right side of his body.

Tex Cronin and Arline Millard were working on the injured man. Henderson was holding dressings and a pitcher of steaming water. At the far corner of the room were several of the Flying G men with a cowering individual who appeared exceedingly frightened.

Walt Grady took in the whole picture with a quick glance. He studied the bystanders and tried to decide just where they fitted into this frontier drama. Then he strode forward purposefully and asked:

"What happened here?"

Everyone expected Henderson to answer. After all, it was his place. The dapper proprietor was swinging a watch charm that dangled from the long gold chain that crossed his flowered vest. He cleared his throat and replied:

"I don't know exactly how it happened. Your man was at the bar, talking to Roddy. This fellow who calls himself Laramie Trent was drinking, and suddenly his glass bangs on the floor and breaks and the whiskey goes all over the place. Trent accuses Halley of pushing him, and the first thing we know they're going at it."

"Thanks," Grady told Henderson crisply. "I'll take care of things from here on out."

"I don't want to have any more trouble around here," Henderson insisted. "If Halley is coming out of it all right, I'd thank you to take him home, and I'll see that Trent is given his come-uppance. I have a couple of boys here who take care of matters of that kind for me."

Walt Grady shrugged; then, looking at Henderson with a keen glance, he replied:

"Thanks just the same, Art, but the Flying G takes care of its own. When we're not able to do that we'll let you know."

HE STRODE across the room; a lane opened in the crowd that was watching the wounded man on the table, and then Grady was standing in front of Laramie Trent. He studied the fellow for some moments, then asked:

"Who put you up to this job, mister?"

"No one," insisted the knifer. "This hombre pushed me and spilled my drink. Maybe I was a little hasty, but that's my nature. I'm sorry."

Walt strode toward the man and gripped him by the shirt-front. The Flying G boys moved back to give their boss a chance. When Walt had his chin almost in the other man's face he gritted: "How much did Buck Dalton pay you to stir up trouble here?"

There was a flicker of fear in Trent's eyes; then he reached up to break Grady's hold on his shirt without success. His yellow, broken teeth were visible as he curled back his lips and said: "I don't know no Buck Dalton."

"What are you doing in this part of the country?" Grady demanded. "Just passing through?"

"Not exactly," Trent replied. "I'm the horse wrangler on the C Bar B down south of the river."

"Carse Bowden's spread?" Grady asked in some surprise. "Does he know that you're here stirring up trouble?"

Henderson shook his head. The cowboys and hangers-on in the road ranch whispered to one another. Grady did not release his hold on the squirming Trent but he did look about him to see whether any of the men who had ridden to the Flying G with Bowden and Reese were also in the room. None were.

Then there was a burst of laughter from Arline Millard, which broke the tension somewhat. Grady looked in her direction and saw that she was standing beside the wounded Halley. The bandages had been adjusted and Halley was now sitting up, with Arline's arm about his shoulders.

The Texas cowboy tried to get down off the table, but the loss of blood from his wound made him a bit dizzy. He took a stiff drink handed him by Roddy, the bartender, then looked about him. His lips curled into a snarl. "Where's that stinking sidewinder who came at me with a pig-sticker?"

Grady prodded Trent forward until he was standing a few yards from his victim. Halley studied the man, then looked at his boss and asked:

"When did you get here, Walt?"

"I just came in," Grady said calmly. "Jim Raynor thought you might need some help."

"Thanks a lot, *primero*, but I reckon I can handle my own buskies."

ARLINE MILLARD was leaning over Halley's shoulder, and she whispered: "Why don't you wait until

you're stronger, Rimfire? It isn't fair."

Rimfire Halley shook his head slowly. He was on his feet now, and he was standing erect and firm. He donned his tattered shirt with a certain dignity, and watched while Arline pinned the knife slash with several plain pins she took from the hem of her abbreviated skirt.

"This Laramie hombre wouldn't have gone so far if I'd been armed," Rimfire told his boss, half by way of apology and half by way of explanation. "If he wants to take me on with knives, I'm his buscadero. I come from the Border country down along the Rio Grande where a fellow knows how to handle one of these *cuchillos*."

One of the Flying G cowboys came up to Rimfire Halley and calmly handed him a long-bladed, sharply gleaming cattle knife. Halley ran it along the ball of his thumb and a smile turned up the corners of his mouth. He signalled to Henderson and said: "Give this fellow his blade and we'll see how he acts when he's up against cold steel himself."

Henderson walked to the bar. Roddy handed him the bloody knife that had inflicted the wound on Halley, and the ranch owner walked back to the chattering group about the tables. Walt Grady watched this interplay without saying anything. Halley stood, his feet wide apart and balanced like a ballet dancer.

The long knife was tightly gripped in his hand with the blade pointed upward. Grady released his grip on Trent's shirt and for a moment it looked as though the knifer were going to slump to the floor. Henderson pressed his knife into the man's hand and Laramie Trent finally grasped it clumsily.

He held the hilt firmly, but with the blade turned down. Several of the men in the room were pushing forward to get a better view of the impending conflict.

Rimfire Halley looked at his adversary and said: "Mister, a good knife fighter never holds his blade the way you're doing. Before you lift it to strike I can carve my initials on your gizzard. Are you ready?"

Laramie Trent's face was pale and his lips were dry. Rimfire Halley took a single determined step forward. Trent dropped his knife and stood still with his hands at his sides.

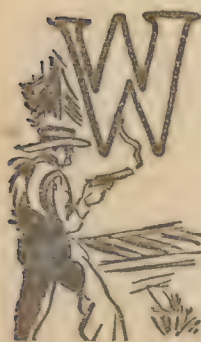
Mutters of disdain came from the crowd. Halley stuck his knife into a trouser pocket; then with the flat of his hand he struck Trent repeatedly in the face until the man's cheeks were red. The border jumper put up no defense. Halley was weakening from his exertions. Tex Cronin took him by the arm and helped him to a seat. Walt Grady gripped Trent's arm, steered him toward the door and with a booted foot ejected him into the dust of the road.

"Go back to your boss, mister, and tell him you came a cropper when you tried to buck the Flying G."

Back inside the road ranch, Arthur Henderson was shouting: "Belly up to the bar, boys. The drinks are on the house!"

Laramie Trent climbed to his feet, moved off into the shadows at the side of the road ranch and vanished in the darkness.

12



ALT Grady waited on the veranda in the shadows of the overhanging roof until he saw Laramie Trent come riding out on his horse. Trent, apparently unaware that anyone was interested in his flight, giggled the horse

into a trot and turned southward toward the ferry.

Grady shook his head knowingly, then turned back into the road ranch. He made his way to the bar. Ordinarily not a drinker, he still felt the need for some stimulation after the excitement of the past few minutes.

Grady cowboys were gathered around Halley at one of the tables, but most of the other men were tipping glass at the long artificial mahogany bar. Henderson came up to

Grady and said: "No hard feelings, Grady?"

"Why?" Grady asked calmly. "You're not responsible for the folks who come here. Forget it."

Henderson was in an expansive mood. He poured drinks from his own private bottle and then remarked: "I heard you had a visit from Bowden and his boys. You sort of set them back on their heels. I was a bit surprised myself."

"Surprised?" Walt Grady repeated the word. "What about?"

"I didn't realize that you had registered your claims," Henderson told him. "I'm glad you did," he went on hastily. "But if you ever do decide to sell, I'd like to have the first option on your place."

Walt Grady brought his glass to his lips calmly, then said: "I'll keep it in mind, Arthur. But right now I have no intention of selling."

Henderson shrugged his shoulders, then bade the rancher good night and crossed the room toward the corridor that led to his office. Grady watched him go, then was aware of the fact that someone else had taken Henderson's place beside him. He looked down into the sparkling blue eyes of Arline Millard.

"Hello, Walt," she greeted him. "I didn't get a chance to speak to you since you came busting in here."

"Hello, Miss Millard," he replied gently.

"My friends call me Arline," the girl reproved him.

"Okay, Arline," Grady accepted the challenge. "Will you have a drink?"

The girl nodded her acceptance. Roddy poured and went on about his other business. The rancher and the girl engaged in small talk, and then Arline said:

"I think it's wonderful the way you men stick together. Just think of you riding all the way in here to see what happened to Rimfire. That's real loyalty."

Walt Grady wasn't sure but that the girl wanted to know about his visit with Daisy Farrell, but he had no intention of mentioning that.

"Men appreciate friends they can depend upon," Walt replied. "I like

to think that the fellows would do the same thing for me if I happened to be in a jam."

Arline, hanging on Grady's arm now, said:

"Let's go over at a table and sit down. I'm getting kind of trembly. The nervous reaction, I suppose you might call it."

WALT LED her to the table next to that where Halley and the boys were sitting. Grady paused long enough to ask the waddy how he was making out, and smiled when Halley insisted that the ten-inch gash was "nothing."

Arline settled down in a chair then, and Walt seated himself across from her. Their conversation continued for some moments; then Grady looked at his watch and remarked: "I reckon I'll have to be heading south. Tomorrow is a working day, and I want to be bright and chipper for it."

Arline bade him good night, and Walt climbed to his feet. He stopped to tell his men: "You fellows can amble along home when you've a mind to; but keep out of any trouble for tonight."

Grim smiles greeted this sally, and the boys waved to their boss as he headed for the door. Outside, he went around to get Ulysses, and when he stepped into the stable he heard a movement close by. At first he thought Laramie Trent might have come back to ambush him, but the figure in the darkness was too slight.

"Hello, Daisy," Grady remarked. "What are you doing up here?"

"I came to see if I could help out," the girl declared. "But it looks as though I've wasted my time. That Millard woman sure works fast on her first day in a new country."

Walt Grady didn't know exactly what to say. He saw now that Daisy Farrell had brought her buckboard along with its high-stepping mule team. He took her small hand in one of his big paws, and remarked: "You're not letting a little green-eyed monster gnaw at your vitals, now are you? Arline Millard is just being human. But I sure appreciate

your bringing the buckboard. I reckon you figured on taking Rimfire home in it; was that the idea?"

"I didn't know how bad hurt he was," Daisy admitted. "By the time the stagecoach came through tomorrow afternoon it might have been too late to get him home to his bunk. I know how those things are."

The rancher put his free arm about the girl's shoulder and said: "Rimfire Halley will be plumb delighted to hear about that. But he's up and about now, with plenty of yard goods on his chest to keep his ribs from falling apart. After he gets some of that Henderson rotgut into his system I have a hunch that he'll heal quick."

"So I noticed," Daisy remarked crisply. "I was looking in the window."

"I figured you were," Walt Grady said bluntly, "when you talked about Arline and her fast work. But I'm more interested about an hombre on horseback who was heading for the ferry. Did you meet him along the road?"

Daisy shook her head. "No, I didn't," she replied.

Walt Grady was puzzled at this. Where had Laramie Trent gone?

The question could not be answered immediately, so Walt filed it for future reference. He finished harnessing the mules to the buckboard, backed the equipage out into the road and turned it around. Then he hitched the reins from Ulysses to the rear of the buckboard and turned to Daisy Farrell.

"Climb aboard, ma'am," he said, "and I'll see you safely home."

The buckboard rattled off down the road and the hoofs of the mules beat a dull symphony on the hard-packed soil. The journey was a short one, and within a quarter of an hour they were halted at the ferry tender's cabin.

Daisy remained in the seat while Walt Grady climbed down. Then she stood up, and with a smile on her face she said:

"I'm going to jump!"

Almost before Walt Grady realized the significance of her comment,

Daisy was over the foot rail and leaping to the ground. He caught her as she came and staggered backwards. His face was pressed against hers and he kissed her again. Then he lowered her to the ground and with a frightened quiver in his voice said:

"Don't you ever do anything like that again!"

Daisy Farrell laughed, then inquired: "The jump—or the kiss?"

"The jump, of course!" Walt replied crisply. Then he laughed, too.

There was silence in front of the lean-to stable; then a voice from indoors called out: "Will you two youngers pipe down so a tired man can sleep?"

Walt shrugged. "If your Pop is sleeping, who takes me across on the ferry?"

"I'll tend to that little chore," Daisy told him.

Walt led Ulysses aboard the boat and they cast off.

They were about two thirds of the way across the Arapahoe Gorge when suddenly there was a burst of rifle fire that echoed between the high walls of the rocky banks above the ferry crossing.

Walt felt the wind of a rifle bullet as it whipped between the girl and himself. He pushed her to the rough wooden floor of the ferry, whirled in the direction from which the gunfire had come and only then realized that he was silhouetted clearly in the light of the lanterns that Pop Farrell had strung along the outside rail of the boat.

A second blast of flame came from a ledge about a quarter of a mile west of the ferry tender's shack. Walt Grady snatched up the rifle that Pop Farrell kept on the boat; the one that had done such good work against the stage robbers. He had located the eyrie of the would-be drygulcher from the muzzle flame, and he levered a cartridge into the breach and sprayed lead into the ambush.

The first two shots struck the rocky cliffs and whined away with an eerie ricochet sound. The third one, fired almost coincidentally with the

third shot from the drygulcher, brought back a weird scream. Then there was the clatter of metal against rock as a gun dropped downward and splashed into the waters of the Republican River.

Daisy straightened up, took Walt Grady by the arm and asked: "Are you hurt? Did he hit you?"

"No," Grady replied simply.

Now for the first time they were able to hear the shouting of old Pop Farrel. He was standing on the north bank of the river holding a shotgun that he kept in his cabin and yelling: "What in tarnation is going on around here? Is this yere some sort of a Fourth of July celebration? Come on back here and get to bed, Daisy. You ain't got no call to go sky-hooting all over Nebraska!"

FOR SEVERAL moments Walt and Daisy said nothing. It was obvious that Pop Farrell did not realize the seriousness of the situation. Walt donned his stock gloves and gripped the cable that was carrying the ferry toward the southern shore. He braked the boat to a stop, then set the windlass going in the opposite direction so they would be able to go back and set Pop Farrell's mind at rest without notifying any other lurking enemies who might be about.

Walt also had another reason for wanting to return to the north shore. He had learned something about the vagaries of the Republican River as it made its way through the Arapahoe Gorge, and he knew that anything which fell into the water from the cliffs to the westward would be swept downstream into the race and over the falls to the east along the north bank.

Walt was interested in the identity of his attacker; he didn't expect that the man himself would be able to give him much of a clue as to the reasons for the ambushing, but his identity might well point to his principal.

It required only a few moments to get the ferry back to the wharf. Daisy was soon telling her father the reason for the shooting in excited

tones. The cabin door was open and sent a wide ribbon of light out over the water for many yards offshore.

Grady was holding a long boat hook and balancing it with the experience gained with a prodding pole when sending cattle up a chute into shipping cars.

Suddenly he saw upstream a form that was covered by a billowing, air-filled garment that looked like a miniature balloon. Walt Grady kept one eye on the floating body, then called over his shoulder. "You'd better get Daisy indoors, Pop. This is likely to be plumb messy."

The girl made no objection but went inside while Pop Farrell came forward with a lantern. Grady's attention was pinned on the corpse approaching him, and he finally lunged at it with the boat hook and felt the jerk as the tine went into the man's clothing. He caught his balance, gradually moved the unwieldy form into the shore, and then dropped down into the shallow water to grip the body with his free hand.

Pop Farrell was beside him, and together they towed the form up on the beach. The icy water of the river had saturated the man's clothing and there was no more warmth in the body itself.

As they laid out the dead man on the beach, Pop Farrell shone his lantern into the man's battered face. Apparently he had been brushed across most of the rocks that jutted up in the Republican River close to shore.

"He's sure a stranger to me," Pop Farrell declared. "I ain't never seen him hereabouts before."

"He's no stranger to me," Walt Grady remarked succinctly. "He's what's left of Laramie Trent, the fellow who tried to knife one of my hands at the Henderson Road Ranch. It begins to look now as though Halley was just bait to get me under Trent's gunsights. But he didn't figure on the tricky nature of night shooting."

Pop Farrell wheezed his surprise. Then Walt Grady said: "We'd better plant him alongside Dan Purdue. It sure looks like Arapahoe Gorge is getting a plumb interesting boothill."

13



IT WAS after the first sales to Army quartermasters that Tex Cronin and his men came back to the Flying G ranch-house with the news that the fences on the southwest area were being cut and C Bar B cattle were grazing on the Flying G grass.

"What do we do?" Cronin asked.

"Haze the cattle back into the C Bar B graze and fix the fence," Walt Grady replied simply. "What else would you do?"

Cronin studied his boss with some curiosity, and said: "Was I you, I'd chouse those cattle in the opposite direction. It would only be about three miles to the gorge of the Republican River, and when those wandering beef cattle made a high jump into the river, that'd put a spoke in Bowden's wheel."

Walt shook his head slowly. "That wouldn't work out," he said. "Fence cutting isn't too serious unless it becomes chronic. And if anyone is going to rope-end cattle over a cliff it won't be the Flying G. Reese and his boys might play the trick on us in return, and we'd be plumb out of luck. We have more to lose than they do."

The Texan settled down, recognizing the truth of the ranch owner's words. Several more days went by before anything else developed. This time it was Rimfire Halley who rode in to report. The injured man was still recuperating from the knife slash, but managed to get most of his work done without too much trouble.

"Boss," he said, "can you climb a kak and ride out to the southwest corner?"

"Sure thing," replied Walt Grady, heading for the cavy corral. "But what are we bucking this time?"

"Brand blotters," Rimfire Halley

replied.

"Brand blotters?" Walt couldn't believe his ears.

"Sure," explained Halley. "Like you know, the boys who bought those feeder herds from the Texas drivers have a number of different brands. They're all covered by the trail brand the cattle are wearing on their shoulders. But someone has sure enough tried to alter the brands and has done a mighty poor job of it. Besides which, there are a couple of C Bar B cattle in the bunch that have been crudely changed to Flying G."

"That must've been some chore," Grady remarked as he finally flung himself aboard Ulysses and headed in the direction of the cattle herd in the southwest corner of the ranch.

TEX CRONIN, Jim Raynor and the other boys were all gathered about several roped cattle when Halley and Grady rode up. Walt ground-hitched his sorrel, high-heeled toward the group and knelt down to examine the brands. Then he looked over the hides of the cattle and studied the C Bar B cows particularly.

He straightened up then and remarked: "There's only one way to look at this. Someone deliberately blotted this brand and choused the cows over here, expecting to blame us for the job. We can expect trouble almost any time now."

Tex Cronin looked at the boss and asked: "What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing much until things start to pop," Walt declared. "I want you men to get busy and drive all of our cattle up into the northwest corner of the range. Leave these C Bar B cows right here. Cronin, you and Raynor take your rifles and get up into the rocks there along those gulches. I'm going to be busy here for a while. I've got a hunch that someone is keeping an eye on us right now, and doesn't want too much company when the showdown comes."

The Texas cowboys worked capably and efficiently to assist him. When the Flying G cattle were rounded up and moving northward, Cronin and Raynor went along as

though accompanying the herd. Grady knew they would circle around and come back to their eyries without further instructions.

The dust from the moving herd was still in the air when Grady heard a shout from the direction of the Flying G line fence. He turned and saw three men spurring toward him. One of them was the huge cattleman Carse Bowden. Another was Gil Reese, his foreman. A cowboy named Hanson was the third member of the group.

Bowden kicked his Morgan through the hole in the line fence and came up toward Walt Grady. He looked at the two C Bar B cattle which were still hog-tied and on the ground. Then his hand went to his hip and he leveled a six-gun at Walt Grady.

"This sure looks as though we've caught you red-handed," Bowden said crisply.

"Does it?" Grady replied, convinced that Bowden, in spite of his anger, would not go off half cocked.

Apparently Bowden did not expect this reaction. He looked toward Reese and Hanson as though expecting some sort of help. Hanson spoke up.

"There they are, Boss. While I was riding our line this morning I saw one of the Flying G cowboys chousing those cattle through the fence. He built a fire over there in the rocks and heated up a running iron. You can see the job that's been done on them cattle."

Carse Bowden climbed down and walked toward the hog-tied cows. Grady made no attempt to stop him.

"Them's C Bar B cattle, all right," Bowden insisted. "What do you say about that, Grady?"

"I'd say that any hombre who figured he could change a C Bar B into a Flying G was plumb crazy, and I'm not that crazy."

"I still don't savvy," Bowden insisted.

"If you don't," declared Walt Grady, "then there's only one explanation. Someone is trying to get you and the Flying G into a showdown, and they don't care whether it's a hot-lead showdown or not."

Gil Reese pushed forward at this point and said:

"I think we've taken enough from this two-bit nester, Boss. I say we ought to push him and his gun-hung crew right off the range and do it right now."

IT WAS obvious that Bowden was inclined to agree with his foreman. Hanson didn't know exactly what his role was supposed to be. He was still holding the gun on Grady, and finally he said: "Reese is giving you a break. I've been in this country since before the war, and usually when we find a man with a hot iron we string him up to the nearest tree. We don't give him a chance to go somewhere else where he can start new trouble."

"You've had your say now, Bowden, and I'm not taking it. You fellows can cut loose these C Bar B cows and sashay over on your own land with them. I'm not afraid of that cutter you're waving in your hand. It might just as well be a stick of wood for all I care."

Grady's calmness did more to impress Bowden than his words. His mouth dropped open, and he asked: "You figure that you can beat my drop with your draw?"

Grady laughed harshly.

"Not exactly, but if you folks can fix up a range frame for the Flying G, there's no reason why we should not do the same thing for you. If you bend an eye in the direction of those rocks up there on the knoll to the right and left, you'll see that two rifles are covering you fellows, and the minute you try to drop hammer on that Colts you're holding, I reckon my boys will smash your breastbone and knock Reese right back onto C Bar B land. We wouldn't want either one of you cluttering up the Flying G."

Carse Bowden studied Grady for several moments before he turned his eyes toward the rocks. There was no mistaking the rifles that were held in the firm grip of the Texas cowboys. Bowden turned to Reese and with a crooked smile remarked: "Looks like this hombre is making us

crawl again, Gil. Do we buck him?"

Reese's hand was on the walnut butt of his gun. Hanson interrupted: "I'm getting out of here, plumb pronto."

This broke the tension. Carse Bowden realized that he no longer had the odds on his side. But he was still a bold man; he pouched his gun without hesitation, picked up his lass rope and swung down from his horse. He walked over to the hog-tied cattle and with a stock knife cut the rawhide ties. The cows lurched to their feet. Bowden shortened a rope-end and choused the cattle through the opening in the line fence.

Hanson rode along beside him and shouted to the bewildered animals. Gil Reese, picking up the reins of his boss's horse, started to follow along, but Walt Grady swung up his six-gun and asked promptly:

"Aren't you forgetting something, Reese?"

This unexpected question caught Reese off guard and he looked back at Grady with a puzzled expression. Seeing the gun in the cowboy's hand, he had the impression that the man was about to gun him down.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

"That hole in the fence," Walt remarked. "I'm expecting you to see that it's closed up and stock tight before you ride away from here."

Carse Bowden looked at Walt Grady as though he could not believe his ears. Then he studied Gil Reese to see what the foreman's reaction would be. Reese looked at Hanson and said: "Jog down to the line cabin and bring back a wire stretcher and some staples."

Hanson, glad to be away from the menace of the guns of the Flying G, giggered his horse and rode away. He was back in a short time and offering the necessary equipment to the foreman. Bowden rode off in a huff, his mustaches bristling.

THE MUSIC of the hammer and the twang of the wire stretcher were welcome sounds to Walt Grady and the two men who were on guard. When Reese threw down the hammer, Grady remarked:

"You do a nice job of fencing, Reese. If we have any more trouble with this line between the Flying G and the C Bar B, I'll expect you to come over and patch it up. Remember that."

Reese muttered under his breath, swung aboard his horse and turned off into the C Bar B range. Grady signalled for Tex Cronin and Jim Raynor to come down from their lookouts in the rocks. Cronin laughed as he said:

"You sure gave them what-for, Boss. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

"Maybe," Walt declared. "But I have a hunch that we're playing with dynamite, and next time Carse Bowden is sure enough going to blow up. And then things are likely to go sky-high."

"We'll be standing by with the necessary equipment to calm things down, I'm hoping," Cronin commented.

Walt moved toward the repaired section of fence. He studied the four posts between which the wires had been cut. Then he looked at the new wire and the staples, and finally he turned back to Cronin and asked: "Did you notice anything curious here?"

Tex Cronin rested his hands on the barrel of his rifle, looked all about him, then shook his head. Jim Raynor was equally dismayed.

Walt Grady's stubby finger was pointing toward the staples.

"They're rusty," he remarked. "I don't reckon that fellow Hanson got them out of any supply in the line cabin. These have been out in the weather."

Jim Raynor pushed forward then, and studied the poles carefully. He had watched the wire-stringing job and seen just how Reese and Hanson worked. "The wire wasn't cut between these posts; the staples were pulled," he declared.

"That's right," Walt agreed. "Besides which, the C Bar B line cabin is a good two miles from here and on the other side of the stagecoach road. That Hanson hombre just didn't have enough time to make a round-

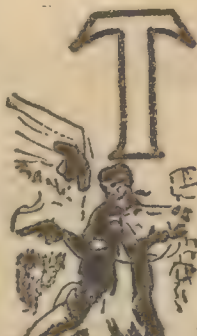
trip ride to the cabin. He had those staples and that wire stretcher in his saddle bags all the while. They were the same staples he pulled out of the fence when he choused them cattle onto Flying G land."

"Sure thing," Tex Cronin agreed. "Maybe we ought to do something about that, hey?"

"We'll do plenty, when the time comes," Grady assured him. "Now let's get our cattle back onto good grass. They'll never grow fat licking moss off rocks."

The three men sought their horses and rode off in the wake of the Flying G cows.

14



Pop Farrell with the boat. The old man was grateful for an opportunity to take the first night off he had been able to enjoy for more than three years.

"Be sure you collect the proper fares," Pop Farrell told Tex before he climbed into the buckboard that was going to take him and Daisy to the Flying G ranch house for a visit with Walt Grady.

"Leave it to us," Cronin assured him. "We'll probably have a booming business here. Just enjoy yourself."

Grady was waiting for the Farrells when they arrived in the ranch yard, and Daisy's eyes sparkled. Pop Farrell insisted that he had come to play a little cribbage, but after passing the time of day, he strolled over to the bunkhouse to play cards with the boys who didn't feel like making a trip to the road ranch after a long day on horseback.

Grady turned up the oil lamp in the living room that was the most important chamber in the dwelling, and as he settled into a rawhide-bottomed rocker he remarked: "Your father is a very understanding man."

"Sometimes he is," Daisy replied. "Other times he can be as stubborn as old Satan himself. He says he gets it from King Brian at the Battle of the Boyne, or something like that."

"He's proud of his Irish heritage, is that it?"

"Sure thing," Daisy agreed. Then she was looking around the ranch house and her practical mind was working with suggestions for improving it. She told Walt what he ought to do about closets and cabinets, and how to fix up the windows with attractive curtains that could be bought at the trading post in Beaver City or the post exchange at Kearney.

Walt Grady nodded his agreement, then asked: "I didn't see the south-bound stage go through today. Did anything happen?"

"Not that I know of," Daisy replied. "It's often late on Saturday. Folks have a habit of taking their time then. But it'll be along."

Almost as though the conversation were a signal, about half an hour later the sound of the coach came to their ears. Daisy and Walt went out into the starlit night to watch the vehicle go by on the chance that High Pockets Haley might have some sort of message for them.

Sure enough, the coach did stop outside the Flying G gate, but it was not Haley himself who climbed down from it. Instead, the coach door opened and a man dressed in dapper clothing emerged. Then Walt Grady saw that a horse was fastened to the spring mounting on the rear of the vehicle. The rider unfastened this promptly and led the horse through the open gateway.

"Hi, High Pockets," Grady greeted him.

High Pockets returned the greeting; then as the stage moved off to the south, Walt turned his attention to the visitor. It proved to be Arthur Henderson.

"How do you do, Walt," he said. "It's quite a surprise to find you with company, and such attractive company. When I first approached the ferry and saw the Flying G cowhands in control, I wondered whether the Flying G had moved in there, too."

"It might not be a bad idea," Walt replied amiably. "I understand that you have been pressing Pop Farrell for his payments. I happen to be one of his friends in this neighborhood, and I might accommodate him so that he can pay you off."

Arthur Henderson studied the man before him as though he did not know whether he were bantering or whether he were serious.

"It's not as urgent as all that," Henderson insisted promptly. "I'm sure both Daisy and her father understand that."

"Oh, yes," Daisy replied sweetly. "But it does become rather disturbing when you ask about the money every time you come to the ferry house."

After this barbed retort, Daisy turned and led the way to the ranch house. Several of the men in the bunkhouse who had been watching the exchange from the windows turned back to their game.

Inside the ranch house, Daisy excused herself.

"I'll see if I can't find some refreshments in the kitchen. The Flying G doesn't have a regular cook yet. The men take turns at the skillet."

GRADY NODDED. Henderson smiled. When the girl was gone, the road ranch proprietor turned to Grady and remarked: "Things are beginning to look pretty serious between you two. When are you going to make the announcement?"

Walt was a bit surprised by his abruptness, but he chuckled and replied:

"I should think that would be for Daisy to say. We haven't reached any sort of an understanding. I thought you were still in the running."

Arthur Henderson shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I am, who knows? But women had nothing to do with

the purpose of my visit tonight. Sitting up in the road ranch, I happen to see and hear a lot of things, and when I take a liking to a fellow I like to prove that I'm a real friend."

"Meaning?" prompted Grady.

"You, my good fellow. I'm thinking of you."

"Thanks," Grady replied crisply.

"But just what is there behind this?"

"It's the cattle," Henderson declared. "I know that you've sold quite a bit to the Army and have shipped several herds up to Kearney. That means that you have a lot of graze growing up again, and can handle some more stock. I thought I might convey a bit of news to you."

"Glad to have it," Grady replied.

Arthur Henderson took a letter from his Norfolk jacket pocket and passed it to Grady. His finger called special attention to a penciled section that announced:

The herd is much too big now, and the prices being paid at the railhead do not make us the profit we had anticipated. I understand that some of the ranchers in Nebraska and Wyoming are buying feeder stock and fattening it, hoping to make their money on the increase. Do you know of anyone in this business?...

"How many head of cattle are there?" Grady asked promptly.

"About six hundred," Henderson replied. "You ought to be able to get them onto your graze and fattened up before the heavy winter snows come in, and you ought to realize a profit of from twenty to thirty dollars a head. It's well worth considering."

Walt made some rapid calculations, considered the cash he had been able to lay away as a result of his cattle transactions with the Army and his own reserve fund in the bank at Kearney. It was a drive of about a hundred miles from Hays to Beaver City, and it would then be only a short run to get them onto Flying G range. It looked like a good bet.

"When are they due in Hays?" he asked.

Arthur Henderson consulted another page of the letter, then replied: "The cars are reserved for the sixth of the month. This is the second. You boys can ride down to Hays in two or three days, taking it easy along the way."

Walt weighed the pros and cons and was still thinking the matter over when Daisy came in with a tray loaded with sandwiches and coffee. She set it down on a rough table that Walt had built, and then drew up a chair for each of the trio in the room.

"Are you men talking business again?" she asked.

"Sure thing," Arthur Henderson replied. "That's how a man gets along."

The conversation shifted to small talk, and Henderson immediately demonstrated that while he might be rough and ready with the men, he was suave and understanding with the fair sex.

IT WAS ALMOST eleven o'clock when the front door opened and Pop Farrell came in. At first he didn't see the road ranch proprietor, and he said: "Time's a-wasting, girl. We'd better be getting back to our place before the owls and the bats begin to fly."

"I'll be glad to accompany you," Henderson spoke up, "just as soon as I complete a business deal with Walter here."

Pop Farrell cleared his throat. Daisy offered him a cup of coffee and he promptly accepted it to cover up his confusion. Then Grady said: "I'll take the name of your friend, and start some men south the first thing Monday morning. How much do you figure he'll want for his cattle?"

"I'm not saying," Henderson declared. "That's between you and your foreman and this hombre. I'm not driving a bargain for any man. You can lose a lot of friends that way."

The visitors departed about fifteen minutes later. Walt Grady walked down to the gate with them, and saw them into the buckboard. Henderson rigged his own horse and rode alongside the team of mules.

As they moved out of sight up the stage road, Walt turned and

headed for the stables and brought out Ulysses. He felt that a ride in the crisp night air would do him good. The sorrel moved along in the wake of the buckboard, and it was not long before Tex Cronin and his companion met the owner of the Flying G.

"How's the ferryboat business?" Grady asked.

"First rate. I reckon," Cronin replied. "We made about a dozen trips and took in twenty dollars. I'd call that all right for any evening's work."

They headed back to the ranch.

"What has Henderson got in his craw now?" Cronin asked.

"Oh, a little job he wants me to do. Figures I can make about five to ten thousand dollars out of it. A sign of friendship."

"Job? Who does he want killed?" Cronin inquired.

"Oh, it's nothing like that," declared Grady. "It's a cattle deal. Some friend of his is a trail boss from Texas. He's bringing a big herd up to Hays, Kansas, to put them aboard the Union Pacific. He figures he'll get a better price if he only sells off the fat ones and feeds up the skinny ones."

"Sounds logical," Cronin replied, "and seeing how we're in the business, what's holding us back?"

"The hombre wants to sell us the runts, and let us make a profit feeding them up and selling them to the Army or wherever we can find a market."

"It still has its good points," Cronin insisted. "Did you give him the highball on it?"

"I'm sending a crew to Hays on Monday," Grady declared. "Got anybody you think might do a good job with them?"

"Well," Tex Cronin replied, "there's Jim Raynor and Rimfire Halley, and I might take a crack at it myself to sort of keep my hand in."

"That sounds all right," Grady agreed, "but you fellows are top-hands already. I'd like to have one of the younger fellows do the job. It would sort of give him confidence. You know how it is."

Tex Cronin nodded. He was fully in accord with Walt Grady's habit of helping all of his hands to become first rate cowboys. He considered the matter again and then said:

"Jed Paulson is your boy. He came up with that big batch of steers from the Panhandle. He was the *segundo* on that drive, and there were times when the big boss was sick that he had to buck marauding Indians and some of them renegades that Belle Starr has gathered around her. They're the worst of Quantrill's guerillas."

"That sounds like a good idea," Grady agreed. "There's just one hitch to it. I'm still not quite sure that I trust Henderson, and there's the rumor that Buck Dalton is hanging out down around Beaver City. This may be a clever trick to get me to spend my good money and then give Dalton a chance to bust me wide open at one blow."

Tex Cronin considered this aspect of the situation. Then he replied:

"That stretch of land down there between the Hays yards and the North and South Fork is pretty well settled. I don't reckon that even Buck Dalton would have the iron-bound nerve to pick up a herd of six hundred cattle along there. We can give Jed Paulson his chance to come through, and sort of head for Beaver City when he's due and let him know we're standing by to help him if he needs it."

The trio arrived back at the ranch house and turned in for the night.

15



ED PAULSON and six men left for the Union Pacific railroad terminal on the following Monday. According to plans they would take two days to make the ride and would arrive at the junction at Hays on Tuesday night. The herd could be expected from the south on Thursday.

When the seven men were on their way, Grady and Cronin set up jobs for the men remaining on the Flying G. After these fellows had taken their mounts and gone about their business, Cronin asked: "Are we going in to Beaver City?"

"Sure thing," Grady replied. "We'll get there on Sunday night, and hang around until the cattle show up. I don't want Paulson to figure we don't trust him, but we might sort of stalk him between Prairie Creek and Beaver Creek to make sure nothing happens."

Plans were set up in this way, but all of the men were told to keep their orders to themselves. Grady particularly cautioned them not to say anything if they happened to meet up with any of the folks from the Henderson Road Ranch. Since there was no social intercourse between the Flying G and the C Bar B, there was little chance that the news would pass along the grapevine in that direction.

Arline Millard arrived at the ranch on Friday afternoon, riding one of the horses that Henderson kept in his stable. There was a heavy thunder shower while she was on the road, and by the time she arrived at the Flying G ranch yard she was soaked.

Walt Grady ran out in his slicker and helped her to stable the horse. Then he steered her into the house.

"What happens out in this country when a fellow gets wet?" Arline asked, trying to retain her sense of humor.

"Most folks just wait until the sun comes out again and then they go and stand in the sun. It usually works."

"I'm afraid I'd have pneumonia before that would work with me," Arline declared.

"I reckon you would, too," Grady agreed. "But this here is a strictly bachelor ranch. I ain't used to women and their fixings, the only help I can give you is the loan of my extra levis and maybe a shirt, but you'll have to dig them out yourself."

Grady motioned in the direction of his sleeping quarters and Arline disappeared behind the rough deal board. Walt went over to the bunk-

house and whistled a nervous little tune while he waited for the rain to stop. It lasted about fifteen or twenty minutes after the girl's arrival, but she still showed no signs of putting in an appearance. Walt began to wonder whether something had happened to her. He was about to cross the yard to the ranch house to investigate when he became aware that another horse was slogging over the muddy road.

His new visitor was none other than Daisy Farrell.

"Hello, Walt," she cried. "How are you?"

"Pretty good," Walt answered. "How's your father?"

"Fine," replied Daisy. Then her eyes suddenly caught flapping clothes hanging on a line in the rear of the ranch house. She moved her horse around to the side of the building and asked: "Have you taken in washing?"

Grady's face flushed; then before he could say anything Arline Millard popped out of the front door of the ranch house and clomped down the steps, in clothes which were ridiculously oversize.

"Oh, hello, Daisy," she said with a light laugh. "Imagine running into you out here."

Daisy looked from the cowboy to the dance hall girl, then asked:

"What happened to you?"

"Oh," Arline chuckled, "Walt and I were fooling around and I fell into the horse trough. I'm wearing some of Walt's things while mine dry out."

Walt looked perturbed.

"Arline's just joking," he said. "She was caught in that thunder shower and came in here to seek shelter. She was drenched when she got here."

Daisy sniffed skeptically. She visited with them for about half an hour, during which Walt Grady whipped up some coffee and sourdough biscuits, and then the ferry tender's daughter rode off toward home. There was a slump to her shoulders.

ARLINE watched the other girl go; then with the wisdom of her sex she said: "I'm afraid I've got-

ten you into trouble with your girl friend."

"If you have, then it's all right. If she doesn't trust me now, what is she going to do after we get married?"

"Arthur tells me that you're making a big cattle deal down at Hays?"

"That's right," Walt replied. "We're going to move about six hundred head up here and feed them on our graze. The Beaver Hills country here is ideal for fattening cattle. I'm glad I picked this spot."

"It is a wonderful spot," the girl agreed. "But I'm curious about this cattle business. How many men does it take to run a herd of six hundred cows?"

"That depends," Grady said. "Sometimes one man can handle as many as two hundred cows by himself. At other times, over rough country and with poor feed and water, the cattle are likely to stray all over the place. Then a single waddy does well to handle fifty cattle. I've sent seven boys for this batch. They'll be along the middle of next week."

"I think I'd like to go along the next time you're picking up a herd. How about it?" Arline said abruptly.

"A trail drive is no place for a woman," Walt said emphatically. The conversation seemed to lose momentum from then on, and finally Arline said: "I think I'll see how my clothes are doing. I've got to be getting back to the road ranch before dark."

SATURDAY night found some of the boys going up to the road ranch, but they were all tight-lipped. Arthur Henderson was on hand at the ranch to act the part of the gracious host and did not show anything but normal interest in the activities on the Flying G.

Most of the men rested throughout Sunday. Cronin, Raynor and Halley drew lots to determine which one was going to remain behind to ramrod the ranch hands. Raynor was selected, and Cronin and Halley jumped for joy.

"I ain't never seen two waddies that were so happy about the prospect of growing callouses on their hind parts," Raynor said grimly.

"You fellows do enough riding in your spare time, don't you?"

The other men said nothing. They knew that Raynor was merely masking his disappointment. It was after dark on Sunday night when the Flying G men moved off the ranch. They did not take the stage road at all. Instead they moved westward on the Indianola trail, and came around in a wide arc that would bring them to Beaver Creek and Beaver City from the Fort Morgan and Colorado trail.

The direct route followed by the stagecoach was about twenty miles from the Flying G, and Walt Grady's route added another five miles to the journey. Thus it was close to midnight when the rannies waded through the creek and came to Beaver City.

Walt halted his men on the edge of town and assigned each one to a task of his own. They were not very well known in the town and might well be considered as little more than wandering waddies looking for a permanent connection.

"There'll probably be nothing stirring around here until Tuesday," Grady declared, "So you fellows can take it easy. Try to keep out of sight of Haley or Bailey or any other stage men. But listen for any news that may give you a hunch as to how the Dalton gang or the C Bar B is moving."

The men understood their tasks, and they went to work.

Grady kept Cronin and Halley with him. They would scout around town, and then head southward to make contact with the cattle being brought northward by Paulson. They left their horses in the stable for a good graining before setting out on their south-eastward trek.

On foot, the trio of men from the Flying G moved along the boardwalk and peered into the windows and over the batwing doors of the several saloons. At the Frontier Saloon Tex Cronin gripped Walt Grady by the arm and pulled him back away from the sheet of light that came through the dirty window.

"Over there at the far end of the bar, sitting in front of that green

baize-topped table, there's an old friend of yours."

Walt Grady followed the pointing finger of his companion, and immediately spotted the bearded, rough-looking, sloppily dressed figure of Buck Dalton. Four or five men were clustered around Dalton in an attitude of protection, and it was plainly to be seen that they were his henchmen.

"Do we call for a showdown here and now?" Cronin whispered.

"I'm afraid not," Walt replied. "We don't want Dalton and his men to know that we're in town. If they've been sent down here to bust up our trail herd, then we're lucky we know where to find him. But it means that you are going to have to stay here and keep tabs on him."

Cronin shrugged. He accepted the order with good grace, then remarked: "I'll keep an eye on him, all right, and if he makes a move toward that Flying G trail herd, I'll burrow him plumb center."

LEAVING Cronin to check on the Dalton gang, Grady and Halley went back to the stable, checked their packs, then took their horses and headed southeastward. They camped on the banks of Sappa Creek that night, and the purling water lulled them into restful slumber.

Early next morning they had their breakfast, tended to their horses and then mounted to ride southward. They took their time throughout the day, and paused frequently to breathe their horses and water them. Once, in mid-afternoon, they threw off the saddles and blankets and let the beasts roll and kick.

Just before dark they saw a rising dust cloud about five miles to the south which indicated the approach of the trail herd.

"Jed Paulson is making good time," Walt remarked. "We'd better split up here. You take the west flank. I'll check on the east side. We don't want to worry Jed unless we come across something that looks plumb suspicious. Keno?"

"Check!" agreed Rimfire Halley.

He looked to his rifle, seated it properly in the boot, touched his hat brim in salute and rode off to the west. Walt Grady talked to his Ulysses horse and the animal increased its stride.

Just before dark he came within sight of the cattle herd. Jed Paulson was milling them for the night at the edge of the Prairie Creek. Apparently they had made the run from the North Fork of the Solomon River without any difficulty.

Grady realized now that he was destined to feed on dry jerky. He did not want to start a fire so close to the herd because it would probably arouse suspicion and unrest among the cowboys. At the same time, if he rode into the camp it might make Jed Paulson feel that the boss did not trust him.

Grady made a meal for himself, curled up in his blankets and went to sleep. At daylight the next morning he was on the alert. Singing cowboys were busy at their chores, packing their soogans and gearing their mounts in preparation for the last day before reaching their home range.

The point riders galloped to their position at the head of the herd. They choused the lead animals away from the river bank, swung them slightly toward the north and west, and with rebel yells got them into motion. Swing and drag riders rode with quick dashes to catch any steer who felt frisky.

Then the herd was lined out and began moving at a steady gait, grazing here and there, clicking hoofs against stones, and rapping horns against neighbors on either side. It was range music; a pleasant sound.

Walt Grady jogged along, paralleling the movement of the cattle. Nothing unexpected occurred until late in the afternoon. Then Walt spotted a movement in a thicket that edged Prairie Creek in the vicinity of Long Island. Grady jogged his horse into a trot and headed in that direction. It might be nothing more than an animal that had come down to the creek for a drink. On the other hand, it could be a stalking foe who had

designs on the six hundred cows who were roaming northward and westward toward the Beaver Hills and the Flying G.

Grady left Ulysses at the edge of the growth and swung down to the ground. His rifle was in his hand and he crouched over as he moved into the undergrowth. He halted periodically and listened. Now and then he heard a splashing in the creek, but could not determine whether it was made by frisky trout, or a human making off to avoid discovery.

Finally the ranch owner was at the edge of the stream. He looked about him for several moments; then a low whistle crossed his lips.

"Tracks all right," he murmured. "Man tracks and horse tracks!"

Checking the rifle carefully to make sure that it was ready to fire, Grady moved ahead and followed the tracks. Apparently the man had been leading the horse along the stream, for there were places where the horse's hoofmarks were over the outlines of the boots.

ABOUT A quarter of a mile from the spot where he had first discovered the movement he came across a campfire. It had been wet down with creek water and the ashes were trampled into the mud, but Grady recognized the sign.

"One man," Grady decided, "but he could be a lookout for a band under cover further north."

Grady knew enough about the country in which he lived to realize that the territory between the Sappa Creek and Prairie Creek just above the Nebraska border was pretty wild; any number of outlaws and renegades had been known to hide there.

The Flying G owner had considered this when giving Jed Paulson his instructions, and the feeder herd would be moved farther westward to clear Beaver City before heading northward to the Beaver Hills. At the same time Grady decided that it would be a good idea to check with Rimfire Halley to discover whether any sign of scouts was evident on the opposite side of the herd.

Walt returned to his horse, mount-

ed and turned the animal toward the Cedar Bluffs trail. He crossed the drag of his own herd without arousing any notice from the rear cowboys, though the dust of the passage was in his nostrils.

When he was well clear of the herd he swung north-westward, and was cantering along when he heard a click of a gun in a clump of brush beside his route. His own hand dropped to his pistol and he was about to draw it and make a diving charge at the hidden gunman when a familiar voice said: "Ease off, Walt! It's Rimfire!"

Grady relaxed and swung Ulysses into the cover of the brush. Walt saw that Rimfire Halley had cooked a meal and was permitting his horse to graze. Grady accepted a helping of the food, then asked:

"Did you spot anything, Rimfire?"

"Sure thing," Halley declared. "I holed up in this spot about three o'clock this afternoon because I saw six men over in the brush about a quarter of a mile from here. They looked as though they were waiting for something or someone. One of them rode off and headed due east. He came back about ten minutes ago, and his horse was plumb sweaty."

"That must have been the one I spotted on the other side of the herd," Walt said. "Did you recognize any of the men?"

"One of them looked like that Buck Dalton fellow you ran into up Kearney," Rimfire responded. "They were sure interested when that cattle herd roamed past. I was figuring on picking up their trail after I cleared up here."

"Good figuring," Grady declared. "They won't do anything in broad daylight, so we ought to have a chance to get caught up with them."

About ten minutes later Halley and Grady were on the trail. They moved along the route taken by Buck Dalton and saw that the horses were ambling along at a slow pace.

"They're sure keeping up with the herd," Grady declared. "Maybe you ought to drop down and tell Paulson to be prepared for trouble."

"Okay, Boss," Halley replied. "But he's sure going to be plumb curious

about what I'm doing down in this neck of the woods."

"You've got something there," Grady agreed. "I'll ride in. You keep tabs on Buck Dalton and his boys, and if they make a raid on the herd, come up on their flanks. Tex Cronin should be somewhere around, since he was supposed to be tracking Dalton around Beaver City."

Rimfire Halley nodded and continued on the trail of the outlaws. Walt Grady studied the lowering sun on the horizon to decide whether it would be best to have Paulson halt for the night or just as easy to head on for a couple of hours and try to make the home range.

H E HADN'T made up his mind about this when he finally came upon Jed Paulson riding the left swing position on the western side of the northbound herd.

"Hello, Boss," Paulson said as he recognized the rider approaching him on the sorrel horse. "Did you get lonesome for us?"

"Tolerably," Grady replied. "How is everything moving?"

"First rate," Paulson replied enthusiastically. "This is the life, mister."

"Are you going to run them through tonight?" Grady asked, deciding to leave the initiative to the trail boss.

"I figured it might be a good idea, Boss. We're about twenty miles from our range, and we ought to hit it by midnight."

"That's assuming that you're going to be able to stir up your cows when they hit Beaver Creek," Grady pointed out.

Paulson nodded. "I didn't figure on that," he admitted. "Maybe it would be best to hold them up along the creek until morning. Then we can take it easy."

"A good idea," Grady agreed. "We can water them, then push them across the creek, so if they do decide to drift in the morning they'll be headed in the right direction."

Instructions were sent to the riders and they immediately began bunching

the cattle to carry out the orders of their leaders. It was about seven o'clock when the trail herd of the Flying G hit Beaver Creek. They spread out to drink, and when they had absorbed their fill, Paulson and his waddies moved them over the stream and circled them on a large flat north of the creek.

The two men assigned to prepare a meal were busy with their fires and Dutch ovens. The tired riders came back to camp, leaving only two men to hold the herd. Walt decided to remain with the rim riders, knowing that Buck Dalton and his men were in the vicinity.

"Send back your riders one by one, without making too much to-do," Grady suggested. "If we're going to have trouble, we'll have it tonight."

Paulson agreed. Grady then explained to the two circle riders about the gang that was stalking them, and they rode with their guns across their laps and their eyes staring into the gloom.

I T WAS after nine o'clock when Paulson rode up to Grady and reported:

"The boys are all around in the brush. We'll be able to tell them because they're on foot. The horses are at the north end of the thicket, so we can hit for them if we have to."

This sounded like a good idea and Walt Grady favored it. He rode back to the camp for his meal, and told the camp men to wrap their duffel and be ready to move out to relieve the riders at the herd if nothing happened by two o'clock in the morning.

Grady led his horse toward the spot where the other Flying G animals were tethered. A man was on guard in the shadows with a ready rifle so these horses could not be stampeded and leave the riders afoot. The men working at the herd were mounted, of course.

Night sounds were the only noises heard for the next couple of hours. The cattle were all bedded down for the night and the songs of the herders came to the guards who were crouched in the trees. Walt crawled

around the pickets to talk to them and make certain that none of them had fallen asleep in the interval.

As he was moving along from man to man he saw one sprawled figure on the western side of the circle. He hurried toward him and shook the man. He was breathing nasally.

"Reb!" he called in a husky whisper, shaking his shoulder.

The man did not stir. Then Walt looked more closely at him and saw that there was a bloody slash across his forehead where he had apparently been struck by a pistol butt.

Grady hurried along until he came to the next man about fifty yards away. This man was hale and hearty. Grady sent him to look after Reb Gilbert. Then he moved in on the herd, realizing that in some way Buck Dalton and his men had opened a spot in the line.

As he was moving forward he heard shouts from the vicinity of the cattle. Then a round of pistol shots whipped over the heads of the animals. They lunged to their feet quickly and started to mill. Then, with clicking of horns and tramping of hoofs, they were in panicked motion.

"Ee-e-e-yayayayayaaaah!" the rebel yell ripped the night sky.

Gunfire came from all sides then. Grady rushed forward and shouted:

"Be sure of your man before you fire!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a gun exploded within ten yards of him and he felt the warm caress of the lead as it streaked past his face. He fired at the gunman and saw him slump to the ground. Then the cattle were heading in his direction, and even as they trampled the dead man, Walt Grady was seeking shelter in the trees.

The panicked herd moved northward into the open and was soon nothing more than a cloud of dust in the darkness. The whole thing had happened so quickly that Grady didn't know just what to make of it.

He trudged toward the grove where the horses were held, and saw that several of the waddies had climbed their kaks and were off in pursuit of

the fleeing steers. Ulysses and several other horses were still there.

Walt tightened his cinch, swung aboard his sorrel, and then began his grim patrol. He came across several of the Flying G men who were cut and bruised from the impact with the locoed cattle.

"Where's Jed Paulson?" he asked one of them.

"Right over there," the man pointed. "He's gun-shot. I tried to get to him, but I caught one in the leg, and I didn't figure I could make it."

Walt hurried toward the trail boss, dropped down beside him and asked:

"How is it, Jed?"

"It's high up on the shoulder," Jed replied huskily. "I should have been quicker on the trigger. But somehow I expected a man on a horse."

Grady was puzzled.

"Were the stampeders on foot?" he asked.

"Sure thing," Paulson declared. "On foot and waving slickers. They had them cattle on the run before we knew what was happening. How did they get in there?"

"One of them clubbed Reb Gilbert over the head with a gun butt. He was probably lying there with an ear to the ground expecting to hear hoofbeats, too."

"We were sure outguessed, Boss," Jed Paulson said. "But the boys ought to be able to run down them cattle. They're heading north, and there's only two places they can go."

"Yes," agreed Walt Grady, "and one of those places is the C Bar B."

There was no need for explaining this statement. As a matter of fact, it stirred the memory of Jed Paulson, who announced:

"That's where I saw the fellow!"

"What fellow?" Grady inquired.

"The waddy who shot me was a C Bar B cowboy by the name of Hanson."

Walt Grady digested this information while he dressed Paulson's wound. Then he helped the trail boss to where the other wounded were gathered. There were three of them, in addition to the gun-whipped Gilbert.

16



IT WAS a rather bedraggled looking group that rode into the Flying G ranch yard after noon the next day. Walt Grady was accompanying the wounded men, who managed to climb aboard their horses after a night's rest. No news had come from the cowboys who had gone after the cows and the rustlers. Grady could not decide whether this was good or bad.

The injured men had their wounds dressed again and then were put to bed in the bunkhouse. Walt grained his horse, brushed him down and left him in the cavy corral in case it proved necessary for him to go out after his other men.

At about two o'clock Tex Cronin and Rimfire Halley rode in, and came up to Walt with sheepish expressions on their faces. When they saw the seriousness of Grady's mien, they grew grim.

"What's wrong, Boss?" Cronin asked. "Where's the herd?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Grady told him. "At least we know that Buck Dalton and his men didn't have anything to do with it. Jed Paulson recognized one of the C Bar B cowboys among the raiders. That fellow Hanson who had the fence-cutting equipment."

"That's just it, Boss," Cronin declared. "Buck Dalton and his men could have been in on it. They gave us the slip."

"They gave me the slip," Halley insisted. "If it hadn't been for Tex Cronin we might never have known what happened."

Walt listened as the two men explained. Buck Dalton and his men had gone ahead on horseback for about two miles from the point where Grady and Halley had met.

Then Buck and four of his men had left their horses on a rocky stretch of ground and ducked into the bushes on foot. The other man had led the horses along the trail to Beaver City.

"And you followed the horses and lost sight of the men!"

"That's about the size of it," Halley admitted. Walt Grady understood now how the raiders, or at least part of them, had been on foot. Others must have been on horseback to keep up with the cattle and to avoid being trampled by them.

"How did you spot the horse trick?" Grady inquired.

"Tex Cronin did that," Halley replied. "He noticed that the horses were running pretty close together; sometimes they almost seemed to be stepping on each other's feet. He knew that men who rode on horseback would leave plenty of room for their legs and packs. But led horses would be drawn together by the bridles."

"Good thinking there," Grady admitted. "But I still think we ought to go check on those fellows who went after that herd. Someone must have pulled a clever trick on them."

THE SEARCH party was unnecessary, however. Half a dozen bedraggled cowboys came riding in about twenty minutes later while Cronin and Halley were still eating. One of the boys came up to the boss and said:

"I guess we're stuck, Boss. We tracked them cattle right to the C Bar B fence and through the fence. But the wire was all back in shape. The cattle went right on across the graze. We started to cut the fence to follow through, and that fellow Reese and a bunch of C Bar B waddies popped up and held their guns on us. We tried to tell them that there were six hundred of our cattle on their range, but they wouldn't listen to us. Said it was another trick of Walt Grady's."

Grady felt his anger rising, but he did not want to blow up in front of these men who had been out all night

and most of the day protecting his interests.

"Thanks, fellows; you've done a good job," he said. "Get a bait of grub under your belts and then turn in. You've earned a rest. We won't do anything until morning."

The men, many of them with slumped shoulders and bloodshot eyes, moved away, and after attending to their horses gratefully wolfed down the food that Jim Raynor had dished up for them.

Even though he was giving his men a well earned rest, Walt had no intention of letting matters rest until morning. He debated the possibility of riding over to see Carse Bowden himself, but decided that there was little to be gained by this. If Bowden and his men were openly rustling cattle, they would certainly be primed for a gun showdown.

"Maybe when the boys are in shape, we can go over there and give them what-for," Grady decided.

THE AFTERNOON stage came along at about five o'clock. News of the theft of the trail herd had come to Haley's ears in Beaver City before the coach pulled out, but the shotgun guard wanted more details from Grady.

"I'll ride up to the ferry with you," Grady offered, "and walk back. I've got some heavy thinking to do, and walking is good for the mind."

He climbed up to the box and sat on the luggage rack while the Kearney stage bounced along the uneven stage road. High Pockets Haley and the driver listened to the details of the rustling.

"Things must have happened to them during the stampede, though," Haley observed. "Because when Buck Dalton got back to Beaver City this afternoon, he only had three men with him."

"I think I know what happened to the other one," Grady suggested. "I ran up against one of them and exchanged shots with him. The cattle got him when he went down."

Haley shuddered. Then they were coming down the grade to the ferry wharf. Pop Farrell was there with

the boat, and the driver tooled the vehicle onto the flatboat. Grady and the other men climbed down, and Farrell was given the news of the rustling.

"What do you figure on doing about it?" the canny old man asked.

"Doing about it?" Grady repeated. "Why, when my boys get back into shape I'm going over to the C Bar B and I'll salivate every hombre that tries to get me to back down."

Pop Farrell shrugged.

"That's no way to get things done," he objected. "That's an outlaw's way. There's law and order in this country. Was I you, I'd notify the sheriff and the cavalry. You hit it off all right with Colonel Quinn, don't you?"

"I reckon so," Grady agreed.

As they crossed the Republican River, Grady decided that this was probably the best way of settling the matter. He not only wanted the respect of men like Colonel Quinn and Sheriff Wilson, but he knew that Governor Burnham was keeping an eye on his activities in the southwestern corner of the state.

The stagecoach stopped at the ferry tender's house long enough for Grady to write a full report for both the sheriff and the colonel. High Pockets Haley promised to see that the papers were delivered without delay.

When he finished his writing chore Walt said:

"I reckon I'd better hit back for the Flying G now."

"Nothing doing," Daisy Farrell declared. "You're going to stay for dinner."

Walt was more than willing to accept the invitation. Daisy was a good cook and there was plenty of wholesome food on the table. They were almost finished with the meal when a horse's hoofs were heard outside, and a few moments later Arthur Henderson strolled into the room.

"Hello, folks," he greeted them. "I heard Walt Grady was here, and something about his trouble with the trail herd. I came up to learn more about it."

Walt gave him the details of the successful rustling job, then said:

"We're going to move in on Carse Bowden as soon as I can get official sanction. I don't want to run my own head into a noose."

"You're wise there," Henderson agreed. "You can depend upon me for help. Sheriff Wilson can deputize all the men he needs, and we ought to be able to make short work of the C Bar B."

The conversation shifted into other channels then, and Pop Farrell regaled them with some of his past experiences. Suddenly Walt Grady happened to look out the window. He gazed across the broad width of the Republican River and up the gorge toward the cliffs that lined the water on either side.

An orange glow in the sky attracted his attention.

"The moon is coming up early tonight," he remarked.

"Moon?" Pop Farrell repeated. "The moon ain't due until two o'clock in the morning, and you couldn't see it through that window if it was coming up."

Dismayed, Walt jumped to the door. Henderson and the Farrells were close behind him. When they got inside they saw that the southern sky was a curtain of flickering bright colors.

"That's a fire!" Grady shouted. "And it's at the Flying G."

THE RANCH owner hurried around to the lean-to and was throwing the collars onto the mules almost before the others in the ferry house realized what he intended to do.

Pop Farrell and Art Henderson hastened down to the ferry to undo the mooring ropes while Daisy came to help Grady. In a very few minutes they had the mules and the buckboard on the boat and were ready to head for the south bank.

The crossing of the river had never seemed so slow. But finally they were on firm ground. Daisy agreed to remain with the ferry in case anyone came along seeking service. Farrell, Henderson and Grady lashed the mules up the slope and onto the level stage road on the plateau. When they hit the prairie they could see the

outline of the flames at the Flying G a couple of miles to the south.

The mules were willing, and they went along at a spanking pace. They were about a mile from the fire when a galloping horse and rider came toward them. Tex Cronin, mounted on Ulysses, whirled to a stop alongside the buckboard, then turned and accompanied them.

"It's the bunkhouse, boss," shouted the foreman. "It was set on fire by a group of night raiders. We figure that it must have been the same bunch that hit the herd last night. Paulson was in the bunkhouse with the wounded men, and he said that it was that C Bar B waddie Hanson who threw the torch through the window onto the bedding of one of the bunks."

"Carse Bowden has gone too far this time. He might have gotten those wounded men before they had a chance to defend themselves. I'll make him pay for this night's work."

"I don't reckon we'll be able to do things that quick," Cronin broke in. This statement recalled Grady to the fact that the foreman was riding Grady's personal horse.

"What else happened?" he asked calmly.

"While Hanson and a couple of his friends were setting the bunkhouse on fire, someone drove off all the horses in the cavy corral. Ulysses didn't roam very far, but I guess the others are long gone. They were heading in the direction of the C Bar B the last we saw of them."

As this conversation was going on the buckboard was heading quickly toward the burning building. The cowboys were busy with buckets and managed to wet down the other buildings in the ranch yard, but the bunkhouse was a charred and smoldering ruin.

When the men were satisfied that there was no danger to the other structures, they gathered around Walt Grady to hear his edict.

"Do we let the C Bar B get away with this?" Jim Raynor asked.

Tex Cronin climbed down from Ulysses and passed the reins to his boss.

"That buckboard of Pop's looks as though it might be able to handle six

or eight men," Tex said. "I reckon if they had enough shooting irons with them they could make a real showing."

Walt Grady weighed this suggestion but before he had a chance to act upon it he saw grim-faced cattle men coming toward the buckboard. They wore gun belts and cartridge bandoliers for rifles. They carried their Winchesters, Remingtons and Sharps under their arms. Each one of them found a spot on the buckboard and settled down.

"Okay," Grady said grimly. "Let's go."

Pop Farrell hesitated for the briefest moment.

"What about Sheriff Wilson and Colonel Quinn?" he asked.

"They can pick up the pieces," Walt said.

"Just so the pieces don't belong to the Flying G," Pop Farrell muttered. Then he clucked to the mules.

✓ 17 ✓



WALT GRADY rode along on Ulysses. Coming over a rise of ground, he saw a wave of horsemen. He swung Ulysses aside and then turned to the men on the buckboard.

"Someone is coming. Looks like eight or ten riders.

We don't know what to expect. You fellows better be ready for trouble."

Several of the men jumped from the buckboard and walked along beside it. Ulysses minced along at a half-walk, half trot. Then the approaching riders were coming upon them, attracted by the lantern swinging under the buckboard.

The huge figure of the first rider could be no one else but Carse Bowden. Grady had his pistol out and leveled before the C Bar B owner said one word.

"Howdy, Bowden," Grady said crisply. "Are you coming over to pick at the bones?"

"Bones?" Bowden, replied in sur-

prise. "I don't think I understand you. One of my line riders rode in to tell me that he thought there was a fire at Flying G. We may not be the best of friends, but in this man's country, when a fellow has a fire, it's a menace to everyone. If your fire gets into the dry grass, it's liable to race along like a whirlwind and burn out all the graze. We've come over to help you."

"You fellows should have thought about the dry grass and the prairie fire before you started this one."

Murmurs of surprise came from the cattle chousers who were now about Carse Bowden in a half-circle. Cronin, Raynor and the Flying G waddies were making menacing gestures with their guns.

"Who started what?" Bowden asked.

"Our bunkhouse burned down," Walt Grady explained. "Several of our men who were wounded in a rustler raid last night happened to be in there convalescing. They might have been burned to death or smothered in the smoke. One of them saw a C Bar B cowboy throw the torch through the window. Others saw some of your horse thieves running off our cavvy."

"Firebugs and horse thieves?" Bowden bristled. He blew the ends of his mustache. "That's too much."

"I'll say it is," Walt said calmly, but it was obvious that the two ranch owners were putting a different interpretation upon the statement. "And I'm holding you accountable for it. Did you ride your range today?"

"No," replied Bowden promptly. "Why?"

"Next time you ride it, you'll probably come across six hundred cattle with a Flying G trail brand. That'll show you that the C Bar B has gone in for rustling, too."

Carse Bowden had reached the limit of his endurance. His men were grumbling louder than ever, and it was obvious that sooner or later one or more of them would boil over.

In spite of his bluster, however, Carse Bowden was a man of calm reason. He knew that Walt would not be making these accusations unless he felt that they were justified. He dismounted from his horse and came toward the Flying G. Walt

Grady followed him with the barrel of his pistol.

"Stand fast, Bowden," Walt ordered. "And keep your men hitched, too, or the first lead goes into your brisket."

"Steady, men," Bowden remarked. "I'm telling you, mister, I don't know anything about this fire-setting and I certainly don't want to know anything about this horse and cattle thievery. Are you sure you're not running a whizzer on me?"

Grady studied the men who were riding with Bowden, then asked:

"How did you happen to get out tonight without your segundo, Reese?"

Bowden bristled, but he said nothing. Walt Grady's next words apparently came as a complete shock to him.

"Maybe you're in the clear," the Flying G owner declared, "but that Gil Reese fellow could be doing plenty of night riding while he was using your ranch for a safe haven. Maybe you ought to do a bit of housecleaning, Bowden!"

Carse Bowden immediately jumped to the defense of his foreman and his men, which was only natural. Then Grady received support from an unexpected source. Art Henderson spoke up and asked:

"Do you do business with Buck Dalton and the Dalton gang?"

Carse Bowden studied the road ranch proprietor with ill concealed contempt, then replied:

"I'd have no truck with anyone like Buck Dalton, and you know it!"

Henderson shrugged his shoulders, then remarked casually: "Maybe you're right. But the fact remains that on several occasions I've seen your foreman and Buck Dalton chatting across a table at the road ranch. I didn't get to find out what it was all about, because I figured I didn't want to interfere with my neighbors. But if it was without your knowledge, then you ought to do something about it."

CARSE BOWDEN pushed forward with a rush like a charging bull. He gripped Art Henderson by

the lapels of his frock coat and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. Then he said: "I'm going to dig down into this matter, and I'm sure that I'll be able to make you eat those words. Gil Reese will have something to say about your charges."

Henderson wriggled free from the grasp of the huge cattleman, brushed his wrinkled lapels and then looked blandly into Bowden's eyes.

"As long as Reese does his talking to my face, and doesn't try to let a knife in the back speak for him, I'll be around to listen."

Then Pop Farrell was done off the buckboard seat and standing between the two men.

"This here palaver isn't getting us anywhere. If Carse Bowden claims he's not behind this hell-raising and figures maybe Reese is doing it on his own, it's up to Walt Grady to decide whether Bowden is going to get a chance to take down his foreman a notch or two. What do you say, Walt?"

Grady turned to his rannies and saw that they had relaxed somewhat since the first encounter with the C Bar B. Tex Cronin and Jim Raynor were standing on either side of the boss, and Tex said:

"Let's give them forty-eight hours to deal with Reese. If he's guilty they're to hold him for the sheriff. Bowden will check his range for that trail herd and we'll help him chouse the cattle over onto our graze. If we don't hear one way or the other in forty-eight hours, then we'll move in on the C Bar B. Boy, what a swell fire that would make!"

Bowden started to take a step forward, but Grady moved his gun hand slightly and the big cattleman backed up.

"Cronin's put it into words, Bowden. That's our ultimatum. You can take it back home with you and sleep on it. But if you're going to buck Gil Reese, I'd figure on keeping my back covered if I were you. He's as tricky as a sidewinder, whether you know it or not."

Walt then pouched his gun. Pop Farrell climbed back into the buckboard and started to turn the mules

around so they could be headed back for the Flying G.

Tex Cronin and the cowboys still stood their ground. Finally Carse Bowden climbed back aboard his Morgan

"I'll look into it," he said succinctly. "You'll hear from me in forty-eight hours."

He signaled to his cowboys, they turned toward home, and a few minutes later they were out of sight.

18



EARLY next morning Walt Grady was up. It would be necessary for the men to get busy immediately building a new bunkhouse.

There was a crew at work removing the burned embers and bringing up peeled logs from a stack in the rear of the ranch yard.

The wounded cowboys had been able to throw a good many of the personal belongings of themselves and their friends into the yard before the entire building had been involved in the fire.

Night herders came in to learn what had happened, and they brought their horses along. Some of the horses that had been turned loose and headed southward for the C Bar B had apparently drifted in the darkness and returned to the ranch yard with daylight. But there were still far from enough mounts to go around.

The men talked about the ultimatum to the C Bar B and conjectured on what would happen if Bowden did not show up with Reese after the time was up. They all appeared to be satisfied that Walt Grady would be able to handle the matter.

Tex Cronin told them: "The boss has sent for the cavalry and the sheriff. If Bowden is looking for trouble, he sure enough won't have any difficulty finding it. He may be able to run roughshod over us on the range, but he's not going to buck the yellow-legs."

Jim Raynor broke in at this point with a question that had puzzled Walt Grady for some time, too.

"I can't savvy what Gil Reese has to get out of all this," he said. "He can't sell off those cattle without someone knowing about it. He ain't going to gain anything if the Flying G gets plumb discouraged and moves away, unless he figures on adding this ranch to the C Bar B. What could Reese want by himself?"

"Dinero!" Cronin replied crisply. "If a man pays you enough money, you are likely to do him a favor. Reese could be doing a favor for someone who would like to see the Flying G kicked into a cocked hat. Someone like Buck Dalton, who don't savvy the reminder of how the boss mopped up the sawdust with him at the Border House in Kearney."

Walt Grady overheard the conversation and wondered whether the troubles that had plagued the Flying G could be traced back to his part in the capture of the stagecoach robbers and the weakening of the Dalton gang, or whether there was a more sinister force at work. Dalton was the sort of fellow who might well carry a personal feud to such lengths. He would know what to do with stolen cattle herds and where to dispose of them.

Late that afternoon Walt Grady saddled Ulysses. He cautioned Tex Cronin to move the cattle down into the home range and to keep all of the men within hailing distance of the ranch house so that any other attempt on the buildings and the stock might be fought off.

The foreman acknowledged his instructions and then watched as Grady rode away. Walt Grady cantered along the stage road in the direction of the Araphoe Gorge ferry, and when he came to the wharf waited for Pop Farrell to pick him up.

Daisy Farrell was waiting on the other side to meet him, and she held his hands for several moments while she said:

"Heard tell that you gave Carse Bowden what-for last night. That's swell. It's about time someone in

this country was big enough to stand up to him. He's been too big for his boots just long enough."

"Carse Bowden isn't such a bad fellow when you get to know him."

"Not bad?" Farrell sniffed. "Why, he's slick as a greased pig at a country fair. That's what!"

Walt Grady chuckled at this, then settled down on the veranda of the ferry house and said:

"Anyhow, like you know, we've given him forty-eight hours to dig into his own dirty linen. If he's on the level, then he'll be a big help to us. If he's the master mind behind all of this, he'll be on guard, but we'll have a chance to hear from the sheriff and the cavalry, and we ought to be able to go down there with enough force to really put him away for a long time."

Darkness closed in about the gorge. Walt watched the water flow by the crossing and saw it disappear in the shadows of the towering cliffs. He listened while Pop Farrell told him about the spring of the year when the high water came roaring down the channel and made it almost impossible to operate the ferry.

Daisy Farrell called them to dinner then, and they had a pleasant meal. They were back on the veranda for their after-dinner smokes when sounds of many hoofs came to the ears of the men. Walt Grady and Pop Farrell climbed to their feet and strode out into the road. It was dark now, and they had to wait until the cavalcade was almost upon them before they recognized any of the riders.

Light from the windows of the ferry house finally outlined the trim but dusty figures of several cavalry non-coms. One of them swung down from his horse while the others signaled to a troop that rode behind them. There were about two dozen riders in all. The dismounted man approached Walt Grady and said:

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Sergeant Fred Dixon of the Fifth Cavalry. I'm looking for Walt Grady of the Flying G. Can you get us over to the other side of the river?"

"Sure thing," Pop Farrell declared.

"But this here hombre right here is Walt Grady."

"Howdy, Sergeant," Walt replied.

He shook hands with the cavalry non-com, then invited him to join them on the stoop. The other soldiers were getting down from their horses, checking their equipment and permitting their animals to drink. Daisy Farrell came on the veranda and asked the sergeant: "Have your men had anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," replied Dixon. "We made camp about ten miles north of here, cooked our evening meal, and then decided to push on so we could bivouac for the night at the Flying G. Thank you, ma'am."

Daisy FARRELL went indoors, knowing that the men had serious business to discuss. Walt Grady remarked:

"Colonel Quinn sure has given me prompt service. I appreciate it very much, and I also think it's going to be good for this country to have matters settled."

Sergeant Fred Dixon nodded, then remarked:

"The colonel couldn't decide whether this was a chore that belonged in his department or not. He talked things over with Sheriff Wilson, and I understand that the sheriff is coming down with a civilian posse. In the meantime, however, Colonel Quinn has received some reports from Fort Hays and the commandant down in Kansas to the effect that the Flying G trail herd isn't the only one that's likely to be coming up into Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado for feeding. He figured that if rustlers could get away with this job it would make them bolder and would bring other renegades into the country. We might as well cut the head off this snake before it has a chance to grow any more rattles."

"Clear thinking, Sergeant," Grady agreed. "We sort of figure that we've cut down your job for you," he continued. Then he explained the situation which had developed with the C Bar B and how the cowboys had trailed the cattle to the fence and

had then been driven off by Reese and his gunhands.

"We're prepared for that, too," the sergeant declared. "Several of the boys we have with us are experienced trail hands. Some of them served as Indian scouts and a few of them were buffalo hunters in their time. There's one hombre who claims he can trail a bird through the air and a fish through the water."

Walt chuckled. Then he told the sergeant about his forty-eight hour ultimatum. Dixon said: "We can at least move down to your place. If Carse Bowden is keeping a spy watch on your ranch, he'll know that you mean business, and maybe he'll get down to brass tacks that much sooner."

Grady decided that this was an intelligent analysis of the situation, and then the conversation languished. Dixon excused himself and went back to determine whether his men were ready to go ahead. The non-coms reported to him. The bugler sounded assembly, and the men stood by their horses.

"Walk your horses aboard the ferry," Dixon then commanded. The troop moved onto the flat-bottomed boat. Pop Farrell watched the maneuver with some misgivings. His craft was not accustomed to a load this large and he was wondering how it would take the strain. Once the men and horses were aboard, however, there did not seem to be much difference in the water level of the flat-bottomed craft.

Pop Farrell, Grady and Sergeant Dixon worked on the mooring lines and climbed aboard just before the ferry started to drift. Pop Farrell left Grady at the windlass and went along the rail of the boat to turn up the wicks so the men would have a bit more light for the crossing.

The horses were restless, but the troopers talked to them and soothed them.

The boat was about a third of the way across the river when suddenly a scream filled the night air.

All of the men whipped around to look at the north bank as though

they were on a single string. The light in the ferry house went out abruptly and then silhouetted figures were seen in the open doorway.

"Something has happened to Daisy!" Pop Farrell gritted. Walt Grady dropped Ulysses' reins and threw off his sombrero. He was about to jump into the rough water and swim or wade back to shore when Farrell gripped his arm and cried: "You'll never make it."

AFTER THE single scream a strange silence closed in about the river. Seconds ticked by. Horse accoutrements jingled and creaked. Then another grim noise echoed through the gorge. Someone was swinging an ax.

The windlass creaked and groaned. Then Walt Grady shouted: "Stand fast. Someone is trying to cut the ferry cable."

Grady's pistol came out of its pouch and he fired at the anchorage of the rope. A swinging lantern then marked the spot where the ax man was working, and it also revealed something else. Daisy Farrell, bound and gagged, was on the ground in front of the rope anchorage. If Walt Grady or any of the men on the ferry fired wildly with their guns, the chances of hitting the girl were excellent.

"We can't stop him!" Walt Grady decided. "We'll have to do something to save the ferry—and ourselves."

In the emergency, the cavalymen, who were entirely unfamiliar with this type of transportation, didn't know exactly what to do. Walt Grady and Pop Farrell, who were familiar with the ferry, found it difficult to check on the heavy rope that was sliding through the loops and around the windlass, because of the crowd of people and horses on the boat.

Sergeant Dixon realized some of the difficulties that were confronting them, and in order to give the men something to do, he ordered them to check their rifles and make certain they had their proper ammunition at hand.

"Assume skirmish formation," the sergeant ordered.

Walt felt the vibration from the rope that was being cut, and at the same time he tried to stuff a marlin spike into the windlass so that they could gather the cut rope about it, and fasten the drifting boat.

The big cable snapped like a giant snake when the final strands were cut through by the axe of the would-be saboteur. Walt Grady had his stock gloves on his hands, but even so, when he gripped the rope and the weight of the heavily laden craft came against the rope he felt the burn in the palm of his hands.

Pop Farrell was working with the mooring ropes which were coiled neatly at each end of the boat with their hooks firmly bound onto them. He took one of these ropes, fastened it securely to the bollard on one end of the boat and then held the hook so that he might be able to swing it for a catch on one of the sunken rocks in the river.

Sergeant Dixon took his place alongside Walt Grady and asked: "What are our chances?"

Grady realized that the sergeant was fighting his panic, but at the same time, like most brave men, he wanted to know just what was ahead of him.

Grady swept his arm about to the east and said:

"The Republican River runs along at a good pace for about two miles. The deep water is in the middle of the river, and there are a lot of rocks that have fallen down into the gorge during freeze-ups. At the end of the two-mile stretch the river falls about two hundred feet in a distance of half a mile. If we get into that mill-race we'll all be lost."

The sergeant nodded his understanding. Then he asked: "Isn't there any way we can brake the boat with the horses?"

"I doubt it," Grady replied grimly. "The horses are skittish now. They realize that something is wrong, and they don't know what to make of it. You'd find it almost impossible to get them to work. We just don't have the equipment for it."

SINCE THE cable was running free now, Walt Grady had been able to secure enough slack to throw a half-hitch about the top of the windlass, and the drift of the boat was slowed down. Finally the boat began moving in a slow arc that would carry it into the rocks but would at least prevent it from going downstream into the rapids.

Pop Farrell came up with his hooked rope in his hands, and there was a grim expression on his face.

"Are we going to make it?" he asked.

"Sure thing," Walt Grady said, more to encourage the oldster than because things looked bright at the moment.

Just then there was an unexpected interruption. Bursts of gunfire came from the rimrock above them, and plop-plop sounds in the water announced where bullets were slushing into the river.

"The dirty varmints are trying to murder us here," Dixon shouted. "Pick your targets, men, and give it to them."

The cavalrymen, who had been more or less helpless for the past few minutes, turned their attention to the spots where the drygulchers were concealed in the darkness. The soldiers had one advantage that the outlaws apparently did not appreciate. Down in the gorge, it was almost impossible for the owlhooters to see individuals on the ferry and they could merely fire at the boat itself.

On the rim of the cliffs, however, the gunmen were outlined against the lighter blue-black of the sky and provided excellent targets. The riflemen might have wreaked a lot more havoc among their attackers had it not been for the fact that the shooting upset the horses further and the animals were lunging at their halters.

Now and then one of them slipped off the edge of the ferry and fought to regain his precarious footing. Squeals and whinnying snorts indicated which animals had been struck by splinters of wood or metal. The small boat was soon a scene of pandemonium.

"This can't go on," Dixon said sharply. "They've got us here like fish in a barrel. If they hold us here until daylight they'll be able to slaughter all of us."

"We're not going to wait that long by any means," Walt Grady assured him. "Pick out six of your men with good horses, and we'll try to get ashore. We'll lash our horses together so we won't become separated in the darkness, and I'll try to make the ferry wharf. I think I know the way to do it. Pick your men."

The exchange of gunfire went on while Sergeant Dixon picked his men. Walt checked the snubbing on the windlass and pushed a marlin spike into a slot to hold the rope. The ferry was bouncing against the rocks in the shallow water but was still much too far from the overhang of the cliffs to provide much in the way of shelter.

Pop Farrell was taken into confidence and he agreed that Grady's plan was a smart one. Then Walt Grady was rigging his own sorrel, and when the cavalrymen were ready they backed their horses off into the water.

Some of the animals floundered, and their startled neighs filled the night, but once they were in deep swimming water their natural desire for survival overcame any fears.

Walt Grady was alongside Ulysses, holding the pommel of his saddle with one hand. The linked rope ran from a ring on the cantle of his hull to the bit ring on Sergeant Dixon's horse. As horse and rider moved along, the sounds of gunfire receded behind them.

There were minutes of doubt and fear. Now and then a horse hit a slippery rock under water, fell over on his side and dragged his swimming rider under water. But finally Ulysses struck the solid gravel bottom of the sloping shore that led out into deeper water.

"We've made it!" he called back to the cavalry sergeant.

MINUTES later the strange cavalcade of eight men and their

mounts, dripping water, were in the shelter of the rocks that lined the sloping road up onto the prairie.

"Now what do we do?" Dixon asked, recognizing Walt Grady as the real leader of the little group.

"Give the men a breather," Grady suggested. "While they're doing that, they can check their carbines and pistols and make certain that the loads in them are all right. We don't want to catch these renegades with the dead wood and then find that we can't throw down on them."

Sergeant Dixon gave his orders to the men. Within five minutes they were in their saddles, moving slowly and silently up the grade to the level of the plateau.

Intermittent shots came to their ears as they moved along, and these were answered by gunfire from the boat. Walt nodded and said grimly

"That's good stuff. It will convince these blackguards up here that we are all marooned on that ferry, and can be taken down whenever they have a hankering to do it. But there's one other thing I'm expecting. They're bound to think of it."

Walt Grady explained the situation to Sergeant Dixon. The sergeant nodded his understanding. Then he issued orders to his men to deploy their strength along an area that would limit the possibilities of escape by the renegades.

Grady was left alone on the cliff path. He dismounted from his Ulysses horse and ground-hitched him. Then he took his weapons and moved forward carefully. Suddenly a figure appeared before him.

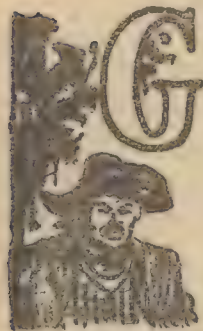
Before the bandit realized that the Flying G owner was not a friend, Grady's rifle butt came up and struck the man across the forehead. He dropped to the ground like a pole-axed steer.

Walt took the chance on striking a match and studied the face of the fellow before him. He recognized one of the men who had ridden with Buck Dalton from Kearney. Alongside the man there was a sharp-bladed axe.

"Buck Dalton just realized that he could set the ferry completely adrift

by cutting the rope on this side," Walt gritted. "I figured something like that." His lips tightened and he moved forward. The night was slipping by, and Grady wanted to be in a position to prevent the slaughter of the men on the boat when gray dawn broke.

19



GRADY pushed past the axe man and closed up the distance to the edge of the cliff rim. He was in a position where he could watch the water below as it broke white over the rocks, and could also see the far side of the gorge. In the distance there were lights still visible in the windows of the main building of the Henderson Road Ranch.

Grady wondered why the sounds of gunfire at the rim of the gorge hadn't attracted the attention of Henderson and the people there. Then he decided that even if they knew about the grim drama that was being enacted on the banks of the Republican River, there would be no way that Henderson could come to their assistance without the ferry.

Suddenly Grady was aware of movement ahead of him. He saw a number of men crouched in the rocks. Two bodies were slumped over, indicating that the return rifle fire of the soldiers had not been without result.

Fifteen or twenty minutes went by; Walt had glimpses of the cavalrymen moving into position in an arc about the nest of vipers. Then a voice came to his ears and he recognized it as that of Buck Dalton.

"Greiner ought to be down to that ferry cable by now. We'd better help him out."

"What are we going to do?" asked another of the men.

Buck Dalton said nothing; instead he opened a pack he was carrying and brought out some oil-soaked rags. He

lighted a handful of these and threw them down into the gorge. They lighted up the area between the two high cliffs and showed the flat-bottomed ferryboat wedged in among the rocks. Several rifle shots came up toward the outlaws, but Buck and his men merely laughed and then dropped back into shelter.

"It sure is funny, isn't it?" Walt said crisply.

Buck Dalton started up as though he had been shot. Then he turned quickly, his gun in his hand. Grady drove a shot into the border raider's shoulder. Dalton's gun dropped to the ground, but he groveled for it with his left hand. Grady said: "You fellows have bucked your last posse. We're closing in here and now. If you surrender I'll see that you're hanged legal."

"Bluff," gritted Buck Dalton. "He's here alone. He may wound one or two of us, but we can blast him right off the cliff and down onto that boat with his friends. Greiner will be back to help us. Don't get excited."

"Greiner ain't coming back," Grady said crisply. "and I have a sergeant and six men of the cavalry in the bushes here covering you with their carbines. They don't like that job you pulled on their friends."

Buck Dalton had the gun in his left hand now. It rested on a rock in the darkness, but its muzzle was pointed at Walt Grady.

"I'm still having the last word," Buck Dalton said grimly. He squeezed the trigger. Grady stepped forward just before the hammer struck the cartridge. The blast of heat and lead swept past his shoulder as he closed the gap toward Buck Dalton.

Sergeant Dixon and his men were in, then. They filled the rocks with rifle fire in response to the shooting of Dalton's henchmen. The odor of fresh blood filled the air. Then several of the cavalrymen started a small fire to provide some light.

"Looks as though we got here at just the right time," Dixon said coolly.

"You're sure a man to ride the river with," Grady declared. "But we

still have a job ahead of us. We've got to get that ferry ashore."

DIXON NODED his understanding. Grady was going around among the renegades. Several of them were seriously wounded and had surrendered. Cavalrymen searched them and relieved them of all sorts of weapons.

Walt knelt down beside Buck Dalton and, after offering him a drink of water, said: "Buck, it sure looks as though this is your last job. Are you going to go out with all the black dirt on your soul?"

Dalton's forehead was covered with sweat, and his hands were clenching and unclenching. Besides the bullet Grady had put into his right shoulder, there was a growing splatter of red on his breast where one of the carbines had sent home a fatal charge.

Suddenly the night was filled with rebel yells. Sergeant Dixon leaped to his feet and shouted:

"What's that!"

Walt Grady laughed. There was relief in the laughter. "It's the Flying G," he announced. "If there are any more of these blackguards infesting the country, they'll take care of them."

Moments later Tex Cronin, Jim Raynor and Rimfire Halley came galloping up, guided by the light from the small fire.

"What's going on here?" demanded Cronin.

"Nothing much now," replied Grady. "Most of the excitement is over. But you fellows can give us a big hand. Pop Farrell's ferry is stuck on the rocks down below the cliff here. We'll have to rig some sort of a gear with our lass ropes and horses, and see if we can't tow it up to the landing."

Tex Cronin studied the situation with his companions, then went out to round up the cowboys so they could take care of the problem confronting them.

Grady turned back to Buck Dalton and remarked: "Everything is going our way now. Are you going to let the king pin of this conspiracy get away with it?"

Dalton's face wore a cruel smile. "Do you know who you're bucking?" he asked.

"I have a hunch," Grady told him. "If I'm wrong, then it's going to make a lot of people unhappy. There's only one way it can work out; there's just one person in this whole country who could benefit by all this gunplay. Speak up, man. Your silence isn't going to do you any good."

Buck Dalton coughed, and a bubbling froth showed on his lips. He started to whisper, and Walt Grady bent forward to listen to the words. Dalton whispered a name; at the same time his hands closed about Walt Grady's neck and he muttered: "I've told you, but the news isn't going to do you any good. I'm taking you with me!"

THE THROTTLING hold on Walt's throat was choking him. Grady brought up his elbow. It struck Dalton on the chin and Buck fell backward, his fingers slipping away from Grady's throat.

Walt Grady looked up out of blood-shot eyes and saw that Sergeant Dixon was standing over him.

"I wanted to put a bullet in the hombre," Dixon said, "but it hardly seemed right with him going out anyway. He sure gave you a scare."

"It's over now," Grady said, rubbing his throat with his fingers. "Leave a couple of men with the dead and wounded and we'll see if we can help the ferry folks."

Walt walked slowly toward the spot where Ulysses was ground-hitched. He stowed his rifle in the saddle boot, pouched his pistol deeply in the holster and climbed aboard the sorrel. Sergeant Dixon found his horse and the two rode away together.

Daylight was breaking in the east. Walt Grady was still worried about the fate of Daisy Farrell. After the first brief excitement at the ferry house on the north bank, there had been no sight or sound of anyone or anything there.

Tex Cronin and the boys were busy at the wharf. They had braided several of the lassos together. Jim Ray-

nor had his boots off and was wading in the shallow water, holding to the cliff wall until he was within twenty-five or thirty feet from the ferry. Once there, he seemed to be at his wit's end.

Walt Grady took charge.

"Heave that mooring rope with the hook on the end," he called to Pop Farrell.

Pop Farrell followed this advice, and a moment later Jim Raynor had the hook fastened to the noose of one of the lassos. Then several of the cowboys mounted their horses, fastened the ropes to their horns and began a slow, steady pull up the ferry road.

The flat-bottomed boat resisted for a while; then suddenly it slid free from the rocks. Pop Farrell and several of the soldiers were helping with boat hooks that were carefully employed to steer the craft away from the rocks. Once it was out in deep water again, it was merely a question of time until the courageous cowponies had brought it back to its mooring.

Pop Farrell was very proud of his reputation, and he was the first one off the boat to hook the craft to its mooring. When the cavalry soldiers filed past him several of them patted him on the shoulder. Pop smiled.

"It took a mite longer than usual, but I did manage to get you across safe and sound!"

Several of the soldiers laughed. The cowboys began shouting ribald jests at the old ferry tender and he chuckled. Then he turned to Walt and asked:

"What happened up there?"

Grady told him.

"Any sign of Daisy?" Farrell then asked.

Grady shook his head slowly. "I reckon we've got to get back across the river before we can find out anything about that," he concluded.

Pop Farrell nodded his understanding. Then he said: "I remember the day back a few years ago when we strung the first cable across here. Daisy took a horse upstream a ways, and fastened a rope onto him, and then kicked out into that pool at the

bend there. The horse swam across the river all right and came up on the sand bar right over there by the ferry house. It's the way the current flows."

"I'll try it," Walt declared.

HE WENT over to talk to his Ulysses horse, then consulted with several of the cowboys from the Flying G. Several of them were going back to the ranch with some of the soldiers to cook up a warm meal. Walt Grady informed Tex Cronin and his two companions Raynor and Halley of Daisy's situation. Then he told about his plan to take the cable back across the river.

The braided lassos that had been used to bring in the ferry were unraveled and knotted into a lighter and longer rope. Walt took the end of this and fastened it firmly to the hawser on the ferryboat. Then he headed Ulysses upstream to the point Pop Farrell had indicated.

The sorrel protested against this second trip into the water, but Grady finally cajoled him into accepting the plunge. Once they were in the water, the actual crossing of the river was fairly simple. Less than ten minutes later Walt was at the sand bar and loud cheers of congratulation came to him from across the Republican River.

Ulysses shook the water from his sleek sides. Then Grady signaled for the cowboys and soldiers to pay out the heavy ferry cable and it splashed into the water and came toward him as he giggered the sorrel up the ferry road toward the northern rim of the gorge.

Finally the heavy hawser was in his hands and he took it over to fasten it firmly around the anchorage. There was a creaking and groaning of metal as Pop Farrell set his rope through the windlass and prepared to test the ferry on its cross-river run. He would have to find out whether the gouging rocks had torn the boards of the bottom and filled the craft with water, or whether it was still tightly calked.

Grady had other things in mind, however. He waved to those on the far shore and called: "I'll be seeing you later!"

Then he unhooked the lasso from the horn of his saddle, swung into the kak and sent the sorrel down the stage road toward the Henderson Road Ranch. He took it easy so as to regain something of the strength expended in the river and to give the horse a breather.

At the same time he was checking his six-gun, changing the loads and looking to the cartridges in the magazine of his Winchester. He took an old rag from his saddle bags and wiped the dampness from the guns, thanking his stars for the waterproof tarpaulins that covered his belongings.

The Henderson Road Ranch was a rather unglamorous-looking spot in the early morning light. Walt Grady approached it with an excited feeling, however. As soon as he swung into the hitch rail he saw that there was a horse tied there.

It was the big Morgan stallion of Carse Bowden.

Grady dropped Ulysses' reins over the rail and climbed out of his stirrups. He walked up the stoop with a determined gait and strode purposefully across the veranda, then paused at the batwing doors to look over them into the barroom.

There were six or eight people in the room. Apparently they had all heard him coming, for they were looking in his direction. He pushed aside the batwing doors and said calmly:

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"Howdy," replied Arthur Henderson. "I see the cavalry went through last night, so I suppose all of your troubles are over."

"You came pretty close there, Henderson," Walt said cryptically. "Seems as though someone arranged a little surprise party for both me and the cavalry."

"Surprise party?" Henderson appeared to be confused. The others in the room were tense. Walt Grady's eyes ran from Carse Bowden to Gil Reese, then rested briefly on the figure of Hanson, the C Bar B rider, Arline Millard and the ever present Roddy.

"Sure thing," Walt declared. Then

he explained about the wrecking of the ferry, the gunmen on the cliff and the threat to the soldiers aboard the boat. "Buck Dalton was the ring-leader," Grady concluded. "But he made one bad guess. He figured his majordomo was going to back him up more than he did. Buck won't make that mistake again."

"Buck Dalton is dead?" Carse Bowden broke in. "That's the best news I've heard in a long time."

"Is it?" Walt inquired. "Maybe it is. In any case, your forty-eight hours will be up tonight. I'll be moving in on you then."

CARSE BOWDEN bristled. He looked from Gil Reese to Arthur Henderson and remarked: "You're a pretty tough customer, aren't you, Grady?"

"I'm liable to be plenty tougher if you don't speak up quick and tell me what has happened to Daisy Farrell!" Grady replied grimly.

Bowden's mouth dropped open then. He closed it and blew his breath through his mustache. Then he said: "Daisy Farrell? What blackguard in this great West would lay his hand on any decent woman?"

"I thought I might find the answer to that right here," Grady replied slowly. "In any case, someone bound and gagged her and used her as a shield while he cut the ferry cable. Her own father nearly shot her before he realized what was taking place."

Art Henderson swung on Grady and asked: "You don't think I'd have anything to do with that, do you? I had a real respect for that girl, as you know."

"I'm not telling you, Henderson," Grady declared calmly. "You're telling me. You see, I don't have to guess. Buck Dalton talked—and talked plenty before he died!"

The action was fast and furious then. Out of the corner of his eye, Walt Grady saw two pistols whipping out of holsters. He gauged the swifter of the two and swung on its owner. His own Colts roared and flamed.

Then Grady was sweeping across the room on long legs and ducking down behind an upturned table. Gil

Reese staggered forward several steps, then bent at the middle and fell forward on his face.

The tattoo of Walt Grady's big gun battered out a song of death in the barroom, and the C Bar B cowboy Hanson brought both of his hands up to stop the blood that gouted from a wound in his breast.

"Hold your fire!" shouted Bowden. "Hold your fire!"

But Walt ignored the C Bar B owner. His eyes were shifting to Arthur Henderson. The dapper, suave road ranch proprietor was looking at him with narrowed eyes. Smoke was swirling up from the barrel of Grady's gun. He walked forward several paces. Henderson snarled like a trapped animal and ordered: "Stand where you are. If you make another move I'll kill this girl."

At the first explosion of gunfire, the tricky Henderson had thrust Arline Millard in front of him. She was now a living shield to protect him from the gun fury of the Flying G ranch boss.

Arline studied the man before her.

"He's shot in the leg," the girl said suddenly. "One of the bullets in the first exchange struck him in the leg."

Henderson snarled again, and pinched the girl as though she were a stone figure. This proved to be his undoing. Arline squirmed to avoid the pain of his malicious grasp, and Walt Grady leveled his gun calmly, checked his hand momentarily, then smashed a shot into the forehead of the road ranch owner.

Arthur Henderson loosened his grip on the girl. A gout of blood ran down into his eyes and blinded him. Then he slumped forward and fell to the spur-scuffed floor. Carse Bowden looked at the carnage about him, then turned to Roddy.

"Let's have a drink," he suggested. "I sure need it."

But Walt Grady had no intention of drinking at the moment. He walked over to Arline and asked:

"Where is Daisy Farrell?"

Wordlessly the girl pointed to Henderson's office, then fell forward in a faint. Walt Grady looked at her for a moment, then turned and walked

down the corridor to the door marked "Private."

20



RADY halted momentarily at the office door. He did not know but that this might be another trap. He did not want to come a cropper now that victory appeared to be within his grasp. He turned the knob slowly and found

that the door was locked. He brought up a booted foot and kicked the lock from the door.

The sagging door swung open slowly on its hinges and Walt stepped into the room with his reloaded gun in his hand. He looked all about him, recalling the first time he had been in this office with Henderson making him an offer for his gun skill. How much had gone by since that night.

He spotted the chairs with their rawhide bottoms, the roll-top desk and the closet in the far corner of the room. There were the windows, now shuttered, which looked out on the alley between the main building and the stable, and the one overlooking the rear yard.

Nowhere was there a sign of Daisy Farrell.

Walt was about to turn around and leave the room to search elsewhere when he heard a rattle of wood. His attention was directed to the roll-top desk. He moved toward it and quickly ran up the cover. Inside, huddled in her bonds, was the petite form of Daisy Farrell.

He pouched his gun immediately, helped the girl out of her cramped quarters and then untied her bonds. When the gag came out of her mouth she gripped him excitedly and said: "Oh, Walt, Walt, Walt. I knew you'd come. Are you all right?"

Walt wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. After all she had gone through, the girl was only interested in his own injuries.

"I'm fine," Walt told her, "and your father is okay, too. There's nothing to worry about any more. We're going to have a new country around here. You're going to help me see to that."

"Father! Oh, Father!" Daisy cried out almost hysterically. Walt comforted her. Finally she asked calmly: "But when the ferry went down into the gorge, what happened? How did you get off the boat? What happened to the soldiers?"

"It's a long story," Grady declared. "We can talk about it some other time. Right now I hear a number of horsemen coming up into the yard. I'd say that Tex Cronin and the boys have the ferry back in service. That ought to be them and the cavalry."

Walt led the girl outside into the main room on the ground floor of the road ranch. Apparently, from his flushed face, Carse Bowden had put away his share of Roddy's liquor. Grady signaled for a drink just as the soldiers and cowboys pushed into the room.

Tex Cronin and Sergeant Dixon looked at the two figures on the floor covered by baize drapes from the gambling tables.

"Gil Reese and Joe Hanson," Grady said grimly. "Arthur Henderson is over there in the corner. Showdown has come and gone."

Arline Millard was seated at a table and sipping at a drink. She looked at Rimfire Halley and he strode over to her. Grady turned away as his cowhand settled down with the dancehall girl. In the silence of the room every one heard his question: "Do you reckon you've learned your lesson, lady?"

No one heard the answer. They were more interested in studying Walt Grady and Carse Bowden. The C Bar B boss was looking at his gunhung neighbor from the Flying G

"What happens to me now?" Bowden asked.

"What can you tell me about all this?" Walt Grady retorted.

"Most of it, I guess, although I swear I only found out about it yes-

terday. I didn't know that it was going to break out in a blaze of gunfire. I will admit that I was planning on heading for Kearney before the day was over."

WALT GRADY wasn't too surprised.

"Tell us about it," he asked. Carse Bowden licked his lips and began to talk, but he was interrupted almost immediately by the clatter of a wagon outside, and a few moments later Pop Farrell himself rushed into the room.

"Where's my Daisy?" he shouted excitedly. Then he caught sight of her. He brushed his hand across his eyes, turned to Roddy and lifted three fingers. Everyone turned back to Carse Bowden.

"Art Henderson had dreams of empire," he said simply. "He figured that this stretch of country between Kearney and the Colorado-Wyoming border was his country. He had things pretty well sewed up in Beaver City, and he was doing all right in Kearney, too. There are only three big activities down in here, the ferry and the two ranches. Henderson had the ferry tied up, and he figured if he could get the Flying G out of the way, he'd be sitting on top of the world. Henderson might have filed claim on the Flying G himself, but he liked to do things in an underhanded way. He wanted traffic to build up on the Beaver City-Kearney stage route; then he was going to set up a toll gate and charge. He knew all about the plans for bringing feeder cattle into this country, and he was counting on tolls on every head of cattle. It would've worked, too, because the Beaver Hills route and the Arapahoe Gorge ferry is the only means of passage through this section. He had a good set-up, but you butted into it."

Sergeant Dixon broke in then and asked: "What was your part in it, Bowden?"

Before Bowden could answer, Walt Grady said: "Carse Bowden was innocent, although things pointed at him pretty strongly. Henderson loaned him the money to get the C Bar B

into operation, because he wanted a headquarters down south of the Republican River. He had Gil Reese and a cowboy named Hanson on the C Bar B to look after his interests. They worked with Buck Dalton and his gang. Bowden was hooked up to the Henderson interests in the same way that Pop Farrell is. He owed him money, and had to toe the mark."

"That's it, all right," Bowden insisted.

Walt Grady turned to the girl and asked:

"Who cut the cable on the ferry?"

"Henderson did that himself," Daisy Farrell replied. "When he came into the cabin I didn't realize there was anything wrong. He had me overpowered before I could do anything more than scream once. After the ferry was cut adrift he brought me here. Carse Bowden, Gil Reese and Hanson were already here. Reese was reporting about Bowden's ultimatum from you."

"And I suppose Buck Dalton was supposed to make sure that the soldiers didn't get across the river, then head back to Beaver City."

"Something like that," Bowden declared.

"What happens to the ferry now?" Pop Farrell inquired.

"You own it," Walt said unexpectedly.

"I own it?" Pop Farrell was amazed. "How come?"

"By the law of salvage," Grady pointed out. "Henderson, who owned the ferry, cut it loose in the river. That would indicate that he no longer had an interest in it. Through the help of your friends you were able to salvage the boat, the cables and the equipment on board and bring it back to operation. I personally strung the new cable, but I'm willing to give you any interest I might have."

SERGEANT DIXON slapped himself on the thigh and laughed aloud.

"By golly," he said, "I think you could make it stick, even in a court of law. Salvage is a wonderful thing,

and this part of the Republican River is navigable water. You've run a boat on it, haven't you, Pop?"

Surprised by his unexpected good fortune, Pop didn't know what to do. So he did the obvious thing by asking everyone to join him in a drink.

Some of them laughed, a few accepted, but Carse Bowden had a similar problem bothering him. Walt Grady adopted the role of Solomon again and replied:

"I fancy from what you've told me, and from what I saw the other night, that most of the waddies on your spread are good, hard-working cowhands. You wouldn't want to throw them all out of work. You can pay Arline here the money that Henderson advanced to you. You ought to make that easily with your own money and the trail herds you can feed on your graze. I have a hunch Arline may want to set up housekeeping here at the road ranch."

Several of the cowboys chuckled and Rimfire Halley's face turned red. Then Walt tightened his grip on Daisy Farrell's arm and led her over to the bar where Pop Farrell was treating his friends at the expense of the deceased Arthur Henderson.

"I've got a chore for you, too, Pop," Grady said.

"Name it, mister, and I'll take care of it for you right away," the old man agreed.

"I want you to sit down and write a long letter to your sister back in Hiawatha. Tell her how things are going, and invite her to come out here to Arapahoe Gorge."

Pop Farrell scratched his head.

"That ain't going to be so good," he said slowly. "One woman around the house is enough. If there are two of them, there's bound to be trouble."

"Now don't argue with me," Walt insisted. "Aunt Emily Farrell is a nice old lady. If it hadn't been for her, I might have gone on to Oregon and done nothing but fight Indians. Anyway, I agree with you about one woman around the house. You're sure enough going to need someone when I take Daisy down to the Flying G."

Rose Decker wouldn't be
having any more visitors . . .



STRANGE MAN, STRANGE MURDER

A Sinister Novel of Terror
at Midday

By BRUNO FISCHER

leads off the big November issue of

CRACK

DETECTIVE

STORIES

Gunman's Yuletide Nemesis

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

(Author of "Jailbird's Gunsmoke Christmas")

It looked like a bleak Christmas coming up for Ed Chime, as he watched his wife apparently falling in love with a former sweetheart. But he couldn't let Lucy down after all these years — even if it meant saving his rival's life!

ED CHIME stood over by the crackling log fire and watched his wife and Phil Loder trim the Christmas tree. Ed had come in from the snow-mantled corrals and his boots were wet and leaked some, but he wasn't mindful of that. He was watching the way Phil Loder had his arm about Lucy, to steady her on the ladder as she reached to hang on the ornaments.

Lucy Chime's black eyes crinkled at the corners and her laughter filled the room. "Oh, Phil, she giggled, "Hush your silly talk, now."

Loder said something else which Ed didn't catch, and the two of them laughed together this time. Ed Chime shifted before the fire, big hands tightening. He thought of what the man down by the corrals had told him a few days ago, and the Circle Spur rancher cursed softly to himself. It was all a lie, a damnable lie. Or was it?

Nick Linnot, gunman, had reined in by the snow-packed corral as Ed had finished feeding the horses. "Saw your wife out riding yesterday," he'd said, looking sharply at Ed. "Her and that lawyer duck, Loder."

Chime had nodded, curtly. He never had cottoned to this scarecrow gunny with agate eyes which never revealed what he was thinking. "Lucy and Loder take rides down to the canyon now and then. I'm a busy man, Linnot. What did you come to see me about?"

Linnot had spat at the falling snowflakes. "Nothin'—much," he'd said, averting his gaze. "Except that

you better watch that wife of yours. Getting chummy with Loder."

Ed Chime's broad hand had clamped on the other's arm. "Careful what you're saying, Linnot."

The gunman had squirmed to free himself. "What the hell, Ed— Just telling what I saw. I was riding through the pines, and there they were down by the creek. They were holdin' hands and—"

Ed's fingers had closed so tightly, Linnot released a yelp. "Get out," Ed Chime had said harshly. "Get out before you're thrown out."

The gunman had ridden away, muttering.

Ed Chime knew that Linnot disliked him, ever since Ed had made a monkey out of him in the rodeo contests a year ago. Strictly the vindictive type, Linnot would jump at the chance to do something unpleasant to Ed. He had seen Ed's wife and Lawyer Loder together frequently, had made the most of it.

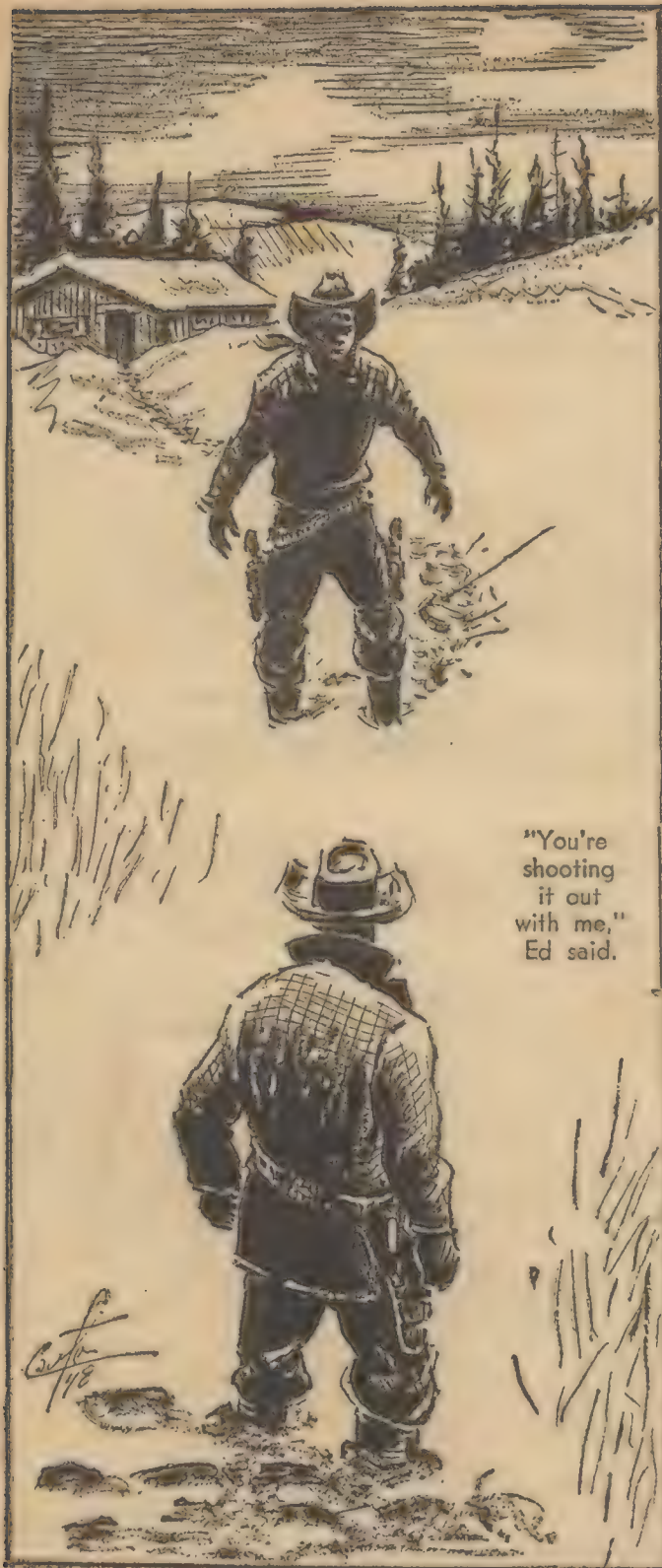
Loder helped Lucy down the ladder, his hand was about hers. Lucy was smiling and she made no effort to free her hand immediately. Ed Chime coughed, discreetly.

Loder dropped the hand, flushing. Lucy went over to Ed.

"Well, honey," she said, linking her arm within his, "What do you think of it?"

Ed Chime was staring at the lawyer. "What do I think of what?"

Lucy gave a little laugh, pinched Ed's arm with her nails. "The tree, silly. Where is your mind anyhow?"



"You're
shooting
it out
with me,"
Ed said.

Phil and I put in a lot of time on that trimming job. Like it?"

Ed nodded. "Yea h. Swell."

YES, THEY were putting in a lot of time—together. Ever since Loder had come West and set up practice here in Gopher Junction. Loder practically boarded here now; he and Lucy had been almost engaged years ago back east in Lucy's home town of Boston. Lawyer Loder still was an attractive, well-educated man.

Well-educated— That was the burr beneath the saddle. Loder was finely-mannered, intelligent, smooth—and Ed was not. Ed Chime was, well, Ed Chime. Big, powerful strong of face, but homely. An outdoors man with less than four years schooling to his credit. Sometimes, Ed had to pause, ask himself how in hell did he ever get a wonderful girl like Lucy. All the education, fine manners he lacked, she had.

The door opened and fifteen year-old Danny Chime stomped in out of the snow. He threw a look at the glittering Christmas tree, let out a whistle. "Whew! A bit of an all right, eh wot?"

Loder laughed ruefully. The kid mimicked his English accent to a "T". "Thanks old chap. Learn anything new in school today?"

"Don't I always?" Danny winked at his mother. "At least, that's what they pay old 'Slat's' Mor-

gan twelve hundred a year for. If you ask me, he's overpaid a thousand."

"Danny!" Lucy Chime said, stifling a grin. "What a way to talk about your teacher."

"Well, maybe I exaggerated some," Danny said soberly. "Slats isn't so bad—in a revolting sort of way."

Ed Chime was looking at the pile of books the boy had flung on the sofa. English poetry, history, Dickens. "It don't seem right to me," he said slowly, "for you to bring home so much readin'. It don't do your eyes no good, readin' all the time by that dim lamp."

"Doesn't, dad," Danny Chime said.

Ed looked up. "How's that?"

"Doesn't," Danny repeated. "It doesn't do my eyes good. 'Don't' follows a plural subject in the third person."

"Oh," said Ed Chime.

And that's that, the rancher thought. Danny was acutely aware of his father's shortcomings, forever correcting Ed's breaks in English. Like his mother, Danny handled the Queen's English flawlessly. No wonder he and the well-read Phil Loder got along so smoothly together.

Somehow it hurt Ed Chime to think that Danny and his mother had to make excuses for him. He tried hard, Ed did, to improve himself, but there were times when he just plain forgot and slipped up.

Ed went out to the woodshed for another log.

LODER slipped out into the snow after him, puffing a cigarette. "Great girl you got there, Ed," he said.

"Yeah," Ed said, "Great." He was having difficulty finding a log the right size.

"Ed—"

Ed Chime looked at Loder's handsome face. The lawyer was staring over the white prairie. "Well?"

"Ed," Loder said, "About this man Linnot, he's pretty much of a bounder, isn't he?"

Ed reached for the ax, gave the log a swift clip. "He's no cream-puff," he said abruptly.

Loder drew on his cigarette. "What I mean is, he's good with guns. He—ah—hang it all, I may as well admit it. I'm doing an article for a magazine. On guns and gunmen. Thought maybe you could help. Using Linnot as a—er—example."

Chime looked at him fixedly.

"Linnot," he said slowly, "is a first-class skunk. He also is one of the swiftest drawers around here. Uses a cross-pull, from the left hip."

He turned to his chopping. Loder made as if to speak, saw that Ed wasn't in a talkative mood. He tossed away his cigarette. "Thanks, Ed," he said quietly, and went back into the house.

When Ed returned to the fire with his log, the lawyer had left. Lucy was sweeping up the pine needles, tinsel and paper about the tree. Danny was in his bedroom, polishing his boots. Ed stood over by the window, watching the dim speck that was Phil Loder moved on the prairie. Ed tamped his pipe mechanically, stuck it between his teeth without lighting it. Loder hadn't fooled him with those questions. Magazine article—his foot. Loder was up to something.

A gasp from Lucy made him turn. Lucy Chime had picked up a crumpled piece of paper from the floor and was reading it. Her right hand flew to her mouth, then she ran over to Ed. The rancher noted her excited breathing.

"Ed," she said, "Look what dropped out of Phil's pocket. Oh, poor, dear Phil—This is terrible!"

Ed read it. "Loder—" the note, dated yesterday, began, "You are cramping my style. One of us is going to be subtracted and it ain't going to be me. Meet me out by the Sentinel Joshua tomorrow at sundown, and come heeled. If you don't come, I'll come after you."

The note was signed, "Linnot."

LUCY was looking up at Ed, closely. "Ed,"—her voice had a catch to it—"Phil is good with guns, but he isn't a match for a man like Nick. He-he'll be killed!"

Ed poked at the burning log. "May-

be Linnot is bluffing."

Lucy was clutching Ed's shirt-sleeve. "Ed! Listen. Nick Linnot never bluffs. I heard the grocer, Tom Patterson, say last week that Nick was talking around. About the way Phil was going after that Walgreen murder. Tom said that Nick was hinting that something might happen to Phil if he pressed the case. Ed, Nick Linnot is going to kill Phil Loder today!"

Ed Chime was looking out the window again. He remembered the Walgreen case. Old Jim Walgreen, shot up on his ranchhouse porch. And Nick Linnot had been seen in an argument with him a few hours previous.

Ed raised his wife's chin until her gaze leveled to his. "You'd kind of hate anything to happen to Phil, wouldn't you, Lucy?" he said slowly.

Lucy's lower lip was quivering. "H-he's a very dear friend," she whispered. "Please, Ed, do something." She gave a little sob. "C-Christmas would be horrible, if Phil were to get in a gunfight and—and—"

Ed released his hold on her. "I'll see what I can do," he said, tonelessly, and went to his room.

Ed sat on the edge of the bed. He did a lot of thinking. Much as he hated to admit it, it was clear that Nick Linnot had been right. Lucy, Ed could plainly see, never had gotten over her love of Phil Loder. When Phil was in danger, nothing else mattered to Lucy. At least she was honest enough to admit it.

Ed took a deep breath, passed a hand over his forehead. In a way, it was his fault, her being torn from a life of wealth and comfort in the East, and plunked down here in this God-forsaken hole in the West. Lucy had been vacationing with her father, the wealthy steel magnate, Abner Whitlatch. They had come to Gopher Junction because Abner had a brother working an oil field near there.

Ed and Lucy, well, they sort of drifted together. Met one day out riding the canyon, and the meetings were frequent after that. Lucy, Ed guessed bleakly, had been taken with

the western glamour surrounding Ed Chime. They had married, Ed rushing the girl off her feet with his courtship.

They had married without Abner Whitlatch's consent. The steel man had left Gopher Junction in a rage, vowing he never wanted to see either of them again.

Abner Whitlatch had looked forward to the day when he could call Loder son-in-law. Phil Loder, reared and educated in Boston, was a direct descendant of Augustine Loder, who definitely had come over on the Mayflower. Blood and prestige meant everything to Abner Whitlatch. It had been a stab in his heart to have his Lucy marry beneath her station.

PHIL LODER had come West, so he said, on doctor's orders; Ed Chime knew better. Loder still wanted Lucy, knew she never could forget him. Now here he was, a successful lawyer in town, and cracking down on the lawless element. Already, he had been instrumental in sending Nick Linnot's brother, Seth, to the pen for life. And he was closing in on Nick himself. Only one answer to that.

Phil was no coward; he would go through with his rendezvous with Linnot, because he represented a part of the law and because he knew the effect it would have on the rest of the lawbreakers should he refuse to face the gunman.

But Loder didn't savvy western gunnies; like Lucy had said, Loder may have been an ace pistolero at college, but that wasn't with human targets. Linnot, with his lightning gunpull, would shoot him full of holes before Loder knew what it was all about.

Ed Chime buckled on his gunbelt, saw that his gun was well oiled and working smoothly. He didn't question his act. He just knew he still loved his wife and was going to do whatever would make her happiest. Lucy loved Phil Loder; you couldn't change that. Thing for Ed to do now was to get Linnot before Loder did, and have it out with him.

Ed Chime knew his own chances against Linnot were slim, but they were better than Loder's. Nick Linnot had a cross draw pull, right hand to left hip, usually, but he was equally efficient with his left hand, either cross draw or straight. You never knew which one of his draws he was going to use.

Ed mounted his horse and rode away into the scudding snowflakes. He could see a figure sitting in the back window of the ranchhouse. Danny, looking over his books before supper. Ed swallowed, got a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach. Picture of his mother, Danny was. Same black eyes, with the funny little way of crinkling at the corners when he laughed. And the same love of the finer things and hunger for knowledge.

"Doesn't," the kid had corrected him, and Ed Chime smiled, sadly. He felt in his vest pocket at the gold watch still there. The watch he'd intended wrapping up with Danny's name on it and putting it beneath the tree. Christmas—tomorrow. Somehow it seemed far away and unreal now.

It would be a shock for the boy and Lucy, should Ed not return, but they'd get over it in time. And even if he did return, Ed would give Lucy the divorce she would be wanting. That was the better way all around. Loder was their kind, would make them a good husband and father.

Ed turned his horse down the narrow trail. Ahead, the lone joshua tree stood at the bend, one limb bent upwards, the other down, like a snow-encrusted soldier on duty. Beyond the tree, huddled the shack of Nick Linnot and his two remaining brothers, Duke and Pudge. Vaguely, Ed wondered where Duke and Pudge were. Their horses weren't in sight.

Nick Linnot's horse blew steam on the frosty air by the cabin. Nick, a gaunt, gray shadow against the snow carpet, waited on foot by the joshua. Ed dismounted, walked quietly forward.

Then Nick Linnot spoke. "I was ex-

pecting Loder. He—"

Ed Chime nodded. He felt the rub of the gun at his hip as he walked. "Sometimes we don't always get what we expect, Linnot."

The gunman's agate eyes were immobile. "That yellow—? Now I'll have to look him up." Ed kept coming.

"Loder'll be here—presently," he said. "Linnot, I'm reading you your walkin' papers now. Either clear out for good, or face my gun. I'm serious, Linnot."

Linnot's hatchet face was blank. "Chime, you damn fool—!"

ED HAD BEEN watching the other's dangling right arm. The arm hung as if encased in cement. Then suddenly, almost before Ed was aware of it, Linnot's other hand—the left one—was moving, and not in a crossdraw. It struck, like a rattler, for his left hip, brought up a smoking gun even as Ed Chime was drawing.

Ed felt the slug cutting a fiery graze along his side, then his own gun was bucking, and Nick Linnot jerked and dropped to a half-crouch.

"Duke! Pudge!" he yelled suddenly.

Ed Chime whirled, cursing. A rifle barked from the trees to the left, and Ed's Stetson skimmed off into the snow. Another shot sounded at Ed's right. The bullet went wild. Ed fired quickly at the spots. He might have known that the treacherous Linnot would have his brothers planted where they might do the most good—for Nick Linnot.

But the main thing was to get Nick. With the gun of the hidden brothers cracking in his ears, Ed took deliberate aim at Nick and pulled trigger.

Linnot's gun spoke almost simultaneously. Ed Chime felt as if a mule had kicked him in the chest. Sharp pain, in and around his heart. Ed's legs lost the power to support him. "Lucy," Ed murmured as he went down. "I did the best I could."

He fought oblivion stubbornly. Through a dull haze, he saw a man

(Continued On Page 86)



The Hanson family of "I Remember Mama" faced the future with confidence—a confidence all due to Mama. "If anything goes wrong," said Mama, "there's always my Bank Account to pull us through."

Things worked out fine for the Hansons. And they never realized that Mama's Bank Account was Mama's own myth.

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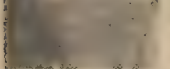
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 84)

riding up, firing, and Ed Chime groaned. Phil Loder, the lawyer. Now, Loder would be slugged down for sure. Three against one, unless Nick had—Ed's fogged eyes searched for Linnot.

Two more shots, then silence. Ed heard the snow crunch near him, felt himself being raised. "Good Lord, man. Linnot got you, just before he died from your shot. I got those two in the trees, but—"

Strangely enough, Ed Chime found he could sit up. His vision cleared rapidly. Reaching into his shirt, Ed brought out his hand, not sticky with blood, but full of springs, cog wheels and twisted yellow metal. Danny Chime's gold watch Christmas present. The sole reason why Nick Linnot's bullet hadn't found its mark.

Ed Chime got a fit of laughing he couldn't stop. He laughed and wept, alternately. It was so damn good to be alive!

Loder gripped him about the shoulders. "Steady, old fellow," and he went on talking in that quiet, even voice of his. Gradually, Ed calmed down, began to listen, Phil was telling about himself and Lucy, and the more Ed Chime heard, the better he liked it.

"Wanted you to know the truth of it," Loder was saying. "You've suspected us for some time. I did my best to win Lucy back, but it was no go. Lucy told me in no uncertain terms how she felt; we could be friends, the best, and that was all. It's been you, Ed, from the first. Well, now you know. I wouldn't blame you for wanting to punch my jaw, old man."

Ed Chime wasn't thinking of punching anyone's jaw right now. He was watching his wife Lucy drive up in the sleigh, and Danny was sitting beside her and they had a third person with them in the back seat. A slightly-bent white-haired man in a fur coat and bowler hat.

Lucy leaped from the sleigh as it still was moving, ran over through the snow to where Ed rested. "Ed, dearest, you're alive! Thank God!"

GUNMAN'S YULETIDE NEMESIS

She dropped beside him, held his head in her arms and kissed him fervently. Danny crowded in, grabbed up Ed's hand and squeezed it, hard "Gosh, dad, gosh!" he said hoarsely. "If that Linnot snake had got you—"

LUCY BROKE in with, "I never meant for you to meet Nick's guns. Just wanted you to tell the sheriff and have him attend to that gunman. Then you didn't return, and we heard shots— Oh, my darling! It makes me sick to think of it!"

She started kissing him all over again.

Phil Loder smiled faintly. "Really, old girl, you're liable to spoil him, you know."

The elderly man in the bowler hat came slowly up through the snow. Ed Chime looked at him, then he looked again. It couldn't be, but it was, Lucy's father, Abner Whitlatch, and there actually was a softening at the corners of his chin, set mouth.

"I never thought," Whitlatch said, extending his hand, "that I'd live to see the day I'd get down on my knees and admit I was wrong to any man. But dammit, I got so lonely back home in that empty house, and there was Phil Loder's letter telling what a prince you were and urging me to come here for the holidays—well, dammit, Ed Chime, I was wrong about you, and what you did today proves it!"

"Father!" Lucy was laughing through her tears. "I never knew you to swear like that before."

"I picked it up," Abner Whitlatch said, masking a smile. "Found it helps let off steam."

Ed joined in the laugh that followed. He stood up, feeling rocky, and his chest was sickeningly sore where the bullet had flattened the watch against it. Ed held the smashed timepiece out to his son, Danny.

"Merry Christmas, kid," he said, and told what had happened. "I'll get you another one, when the stores open up after the holidays."

Danny was looking at the ruined watch as if it were a king's fortune. "...and it saved your life. Dad, I

(Continued On Page 88)



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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 87)

couldn't ask for a better present. Not in a billion years."

"It don't run," Ed Chime said. "Doesn't, Dad," Danny said, and Ed Chime grinned. He hoped to hell Danny would continue to correct him for the rest of his natural life. Ed Chime was going to have one heck of a swell Christmas tomorrow.

He got into the sleigh, followed by Lucy, Danny and Abner Whitlatch. Phil Loder rode on ahead on his horse, and Lucy whipped up the team, and they all whisked off through the scudding snow. Ed Chime's voice was the loudest as the sparkling strains of "Jingle Bells" rose towards the swiftly darkening afternoon sky.

THE END

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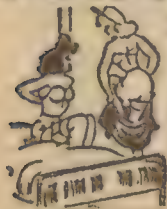
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THE GUN-LORD FROM

LIVERPOOL

A True Story

by Lee Baldwin

LANGFORD PEEL sank dejectedly onto the big pine log, his gaunt body hunched forward, gray eyes gloomily taking in his surroundings which were indeed far from the shores of his native England.

He was in an alley behind the Salt Lake House, a secluded spot where he could think over his predicament and at the same time escape the inquiring glances of the few acquaintances he had made since his arrival in Salt Lake City. His clothes were in rags; he was broke and hungry.

Bitterly he stared at the ground, rubbing grimy fingers over his stubbled face and through dark, untrimmed hair. Into his mind's eye flashed the smug, well-fed faces of Conley and Rucker, gamblers he had helped extensively two years before in Leavenworth, Kansas when the going was tough for everyone there.

Sitting thus abjectly, he did not see the two owners of the Salt Lake House watching him from the nearby doorway of that establishment.

"Who is that man?" Robinson asked, nodding toward the slouching figure. "I've seen him around quite a bit lately."

"That's Langford Peel, a fast man with either a gun or a deck of cards," Robinson's partner said. "He took care of a lot of the boys around Leavenworth who were down and out that hard winter a few years ago."

Robinson studied Peel silently, aware of the pride still apparent in the big gambler's spiritless expression. "Bad luck can be a terrible thing," he finally commented.

Later that day Peel found Dave Conley working in Robinson's, manning the "lookout seat" near where a faro game was in progress.

"Hello, Dave," Peel said, a taut smile on his lips.

Conley nodded briefly, running wary eyes over the ragged figure before him. The next words came hard for Langford Peel. "Dave, I wish you'd lend me twenty-five dol-

(Continued On Page 92)

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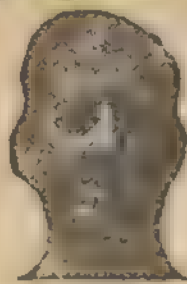
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 90)

lars I..."

Dave Conley jerked his head from side to side. "I'm not in the lending business fellow," he said coldly. "And right now, I'm pretty busy, so step away."

Suddenly Robinson who had been watching from a nearby money drawer, shoved out a handful of coins. "Mr. Peel," he said. "Here's money. You're welcome to as much as you need!"

In disbelief Peel stared at the coins. "Twenty-five will do me," he choked, picking up the money. "You needn't worry about this being paid back, sir; I'd rather be shot than cheat you out of it."

Then turning to the glaring Conley, he picked up the "case keeper" used in marking the game and threw it. Conley dodged and ran for the door. Instantly Peel jerked his six-gun and started to follow, but Robinson grabbed his arm. "For Gawd's sake, don't cause a ruckus!"

Peel nodded, holstered the gun, his face haggard.

TWENTY minutes later he was on Commercial Street, stepping into a faro bank where he figured he might do some good with the money Robinson had lent him. To his surprise Rucker was running the game, but instead of leaving, Peel stepped up and placed his bet. Rucker looked up, recognized the unkempt figure before him.

"Beat it!" he snapped. "I don't allow tramps in my game. Get out!"

Peel met Rucker's stoney stare, and his brain went numb with pain of injured pride and contempt for this tin-horn. Suddenly he grabbed a chair and slammed it at Rucker, knocking him to the floor. Rucker scrambled to his feet and ran out the door. A few minutes later he was hidden in the upstairs apartment of an adjacent store. Grimly, Peel followed, moving into the dim-lit rear of the store and finding the stairway which Rucker had used.

Above, Rucker, waited behind a door his revolver out and cocked. When Peel appeared out of the stairway, Rucker jammed the gun in his back. "I meant what I said, Peel," he

THE GUN LORD FROM LIVERPOOL

snailed. "No tramps in my game!"

Peel went for his gun. It made little difference if Rucker's was already stabbing into his back. Their guns blazed simultaneously and both men went down in thundering gunfire, pouring lead into each other as they fell. Peel was shot through the cheek, thigh and shoulder. The slugs fired into Rucker were fatal and he died in a few minutes.

General sympathy was with Peel and friends hid him while his wounds healed. Later, he was given money, a good horse and helped in escaping the country.

For a time Peel lived in California where he associated with the toughest of outlaws. By the time he rode into Virginia City, Nevada, in 1859 his gun wizardry was a legend.

Then one day Eldorado Johnny rode into town for the express purpose of wiping Peel out and taking over. He bragged of this ambition to anyone who would listen. An old man remarked that Johnny had better have his boots shined because Peel had his own private graveyard and didn't want anyone buried there with dirty boots.

Finally Eldorado Johnny heard that Peel was in Ben Irwin's saloon. He swaggered through the door boldly eyeing everyone in the room. "Which one of you so-and-sos is this two-bit tough by the name of Langford Peel?"

"I'm Peel," the immaculately dressed gambler said quietly.

Eldorado Johnny move forward. "Git your horse an start ridin," he snapped, "because there ain't room in this town fer you, now that I'm here!"

"I don't believe I know you," commented Peel.

"Gol-durnit!" roared Eldorado Johnny. "That don't make no difference. Git outa town 'er go fer your gun. I'm takin' over!"

Langford Peel smiled faintly and said: "Have a drink with me, sir. Here in Virginia City we try to make strangers feel at home."

Eldorado Johnny's face twisted into a grimace of rage and he drew

(Continued On Page 94)

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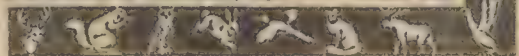


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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 93)

his gun. "Lay off that high-brow lingo. I made a long ride to smoke you down, not drink your likker!"

Peel nodded gravely. "Let us go outside then, sir. It is too crowded here."

In the street a few steps from Peel, Eldorado Johnny wheeled, aiming the gun he had already drawn. He did not fire because Peel's gun was already roaring, slamming him into the dust.

IN 1867 Langford Peel and a mining camp ruffian named John Bull let Nevada or Montana where they held mining interests together. On the way, they parted in Salt Lake, John Bull riding on ahead to investigate the property, later to meet Peel in Helena. They rejoined two weeks later as agreed, meeting in the Hurley & Chase saloon where Bull gave Peel some unexpected bad news. Knowing Bull's former reputation for thievery and deceit, Peel accused him of lying about the mining property from the start. The thought of being tricked by a man whom he had trusted enraged Peel and he drew his gun. John Bull was a coward at heart but he knew Peel would not shoot in cold blood.

"Don't shoot!" he whimpered. "I'm not healed!"

Peel slapped Bull's face hard. "Get a gun then, and come shooting," he said in frustrated rage, "for I'm killing you on sight!"

Bull left and a few minutes later Peel stepped out onto the street. Bull was nowhere in sight. Peel moved up the street, thinking that he was rid of Bull.

Suddenly Bull stepped from around a building, the gun he jammed in Peel's face belching lead. A look of disbelief spread across Peel's face as the first shot went into his neck, then his knees sagged and his twitching fingers grasped vainly for his gun. The next shot was squarely in the face and he crumpled without a word.

John Bull left town quickly after an unpopular court acquittal.

Langford Peel was only 36 when he was gunned down. "Beloved by his friends and respected by his enemies," reads the marker on his grave in the Helena cemetery.

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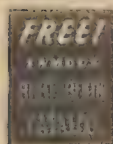
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Roosian dancer! Aye yes, she was there, Anna Petrova claimed she had been banished from Russia because of her daring dances. The Czar had ruled against her; the gyrations of her gorgeous silken body were indecent. She had refused to accept a yellow ticket. Yellow tickets were issued to professional harlots; she was not a harlot. Had she accepted a yellow ticket, she would have been permitted to stay in her native country.

This was not pumpkin pie; it was the truth. She had official documents to establish her contentions and her statements as true. She had landed in New York, graceful, supple, willowy, with dusky eyes aglow, her deep black hair cascading over her shoulders. But there was fate and danger and violence in those eyes, fate for careless men.

It was their fate to die with violence, said the newspapers.

Anna Petrova declined to grace the New York stage with her lovely squirming carcass. She took to the wild west. Maybe she was too crude for the American stage; but the American stage had never had a more beautiful star to grace it. Out west she packed 'em in. She twisted and squirmed her way from one saloon dance hall to another. Denver was thriving. Pike's Peak was erupting gold, a volcano with riches spouting out of it instead of burning lava. For ten days Anna Petrova packed em in, thousands of 'em. The last night four men died with their boots on: two had taken up for the Roosian dancer, and two had shot it out with them because they were angered. The two had tried to kidnap the Roosian dancer, and her semi-nude body was on a horse in front of the stage door when the fight started. Bedlam, and bullets and Anna Petrova fled to her hotel, aware that four men had died because of her.

She wore flesh-tinted tights. In the spotlight of the magic lanterns she appeared to be nude. Men cheered her, fired revolvers and showered her with gold. She traveled alone, except for a little monkeylike man who picked up the coins that rained down on her and carried her hand luggage

and who answered to the name of Trotsky.

ANNA PETROVA wound up her career in Cripple Creek that eventful night in 1894. A drunken miner named George Hennessy, and a young saloonkeeper, Marshall Evarts, fought to the death on the dance floor, because Hennessy had interrupted her dance, to drag her into his curtained booth.

She slapped him, struggled and tried to wrap the curtains around her painted, flesh-trunked body. A hundred men were ready to tear him asunder for his audacity when Evarts rushed to her aid. Hennessy struck him, Evarts retaliated. Hennessy drew a knife. Evarts grabbed up a cheese knife from the table of the booth. They stuck their knives in each other.

Anna Petrova escaped, running to her hotel as the two men lay dying in the dancehall. A dozen men, divided into two factions, shot it out in the street and four of them were killed, before the law, mounted on horses and swinging whips, dispersed the embattled elements.

Anna said she would never dance again. She was rich, but she was tired and she wanted to settle down. She bought a saloon and imported twenty-one girls from St. Louis and Kansas City. The prettiest one was June Havelock, a blonde. Anna took a fancy to her and confided in the blonde that she had never been in love.

Her saloon was one of the finest in Cripple Creek. Her riches kept piling up. The old man who had come from Russia with her drank himself to death. She was alone. When she met Jack Graham, a dude Englishman who was an expert with cards, she lost her heart to him. The Dude could perform miracles with cards, miracles never seen before, tricks all his own. But he was not interested in Anna Petrova. She virtually threw herself at him; he ran away from her. The irony of the situation came out when he fell in love with the blonde, June Havelock. June was a habitual drunk. Forty percent of the

time she was inebriated. But the Dude looked after her like she was a baby. When the truth reached Anna Petrova, the latter was aroused to fury. But she coolly went about the business of eliminating her rival for the Dude's affections. She hired June Havelock to desert the Dude, and the blonde left at midnight in a buckboard to which was hitched the fastest team of bronco's in the country. She was driven to Denver, and there she caught a train to St. Louis.

The Dude had this to say about Anna Petrova, although he did not know that she was behind his trouble, "For all her fine gowns, she's just a dirty tramp."

But there was a deep seated motive behind the saloon-owner's actions. She didn't want the man she loved to waste his life on a worthless woman.

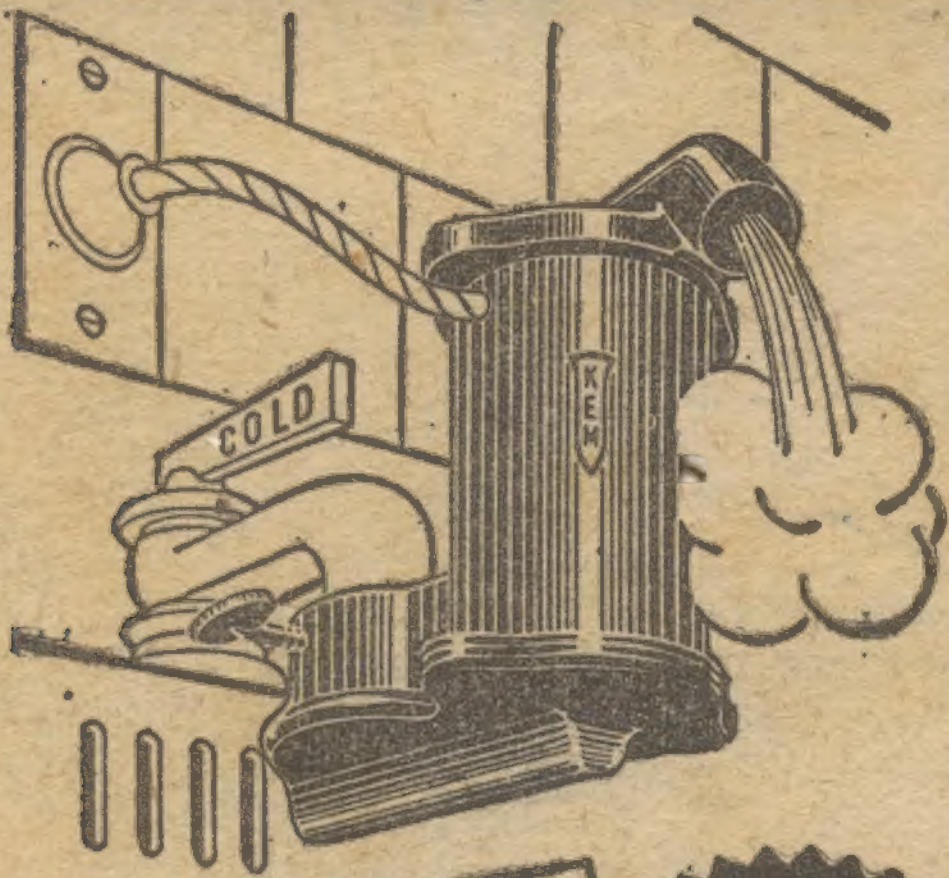
IT WAS A week before the Englishman found out what had happened. He was dealing for Anna Petrova and running her roulette table. A drunken cowboy whispered into the Dude's ear. Nobody knew how the cowpoke found out that Anna Petrova had hired June Havelock to desert the Dude by giving her a thousand dollars. But the Dude, armed with this deadly information, got up from his card game, walked up the stairs to Anna Petrova's office and, knocking on the door, said when she opened it, "I've got a little present for you." He shot her five times.

Quickly relenting, he knelt on the floor and picked her up; she whispered, "I love you," and died in his arms. Ten minutes later his body was swinging from a rafter in the saloon; a mob had lynched him.

Anna Petrova was buried at the southwest corner of Cripple Creek and it is said that a rich gold vein was found when her grave was being excavated. Not far away a mine shaft was sunk and the mine was named the Anna Petrova. For years gray doves came to form a blanket over the mound and even the noise from the mine did not frighten them away.

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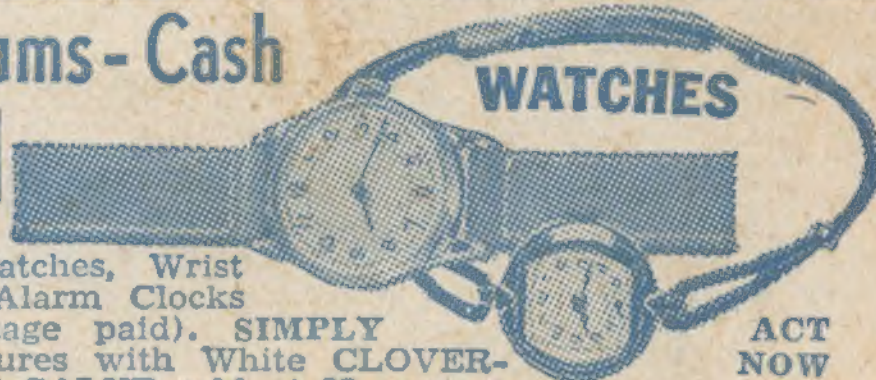
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St. R.D. Box.....
Town Zone
No. State.....
Print LAST
Name Here

Paste on a postal card or mail in an envelope NOW



Ladies
Girls



MEN! DON'T STAY FAT

You CAN **LOSE**
7 POUNDS
UP TO **7 POUNDS** IN ONE WEEK

SAFELY! WITHOUT **HEALTH**
RISKING



Good
for
Ladies,
too!

NO DRUGS
NO HARDSHIP
NO EXERCISE
NO MASSAGE
NOTHING TO WEAR

LOSE UGLY FAT NOW . . . Notice the difference in POUNDS and INCHES the very first week, whether Overweight 10 or 100 Pounds . . . even if burdened with fat for many years (illness excepted). The Protam Plan controls weight . . . **WEIGHT LOSS CAN BE PERMANENT** by continuing the plan, once down to normal, it helps retain your new "athlete's waistline" as long as you like. Protam is not a Drug, Laxative or Thyroid . . . absolutely Harmless . . . Is Good For You.

PROTAM PLAN OXIDIZES EXCESS FAT

The Protam Plan reacts quickly . . . Drastically Cuts down Fat Producing Calories. USES UP ACCUMULATED EXCESS FAT. Lose Ugly Fat Economically, Simply, Pleasantly, without risking your health. Look and feel better, see bulges disappear within the first weeks. Thousands of Overweight people report sensational results, some Losing 20 Pounds in 30 Days, others enthuse about "How Well They Feel" while Reducing. To achieve same results . . . Just Take Protam as directed, follow the Protam Plan Once or Twice a day, according to how fast you wish to Lose Weight. The Protam Plan is based on a low calory regimen. Protam is an appetite appeasing FOOD, Scientifically Formulated, Laboratory Tested and Approved, Fortified with energy-giving PROTEINS, AMINO ACIDS, MINERALS and VITAMINS.

REDUCE
WITHIN 10 DAYS OR
MONEY REFUNDED

FREE 10 DAY
TRIAL OFFER

ORDER TODAY . . . You risk NO MONEY, not even postage. You must Lose Pounds and inches within Ten Days or your Money will be Refunded Immediately, including postage. Your decision is final. Just Mail Coupon Today . . . NOW. On delivery simply pay postman \$2.50 . . . begin losing Fat the first few days. Enjoy New Energy . . . Have confidence in your appearance.

SEND NO MONEY

ASSOCIATED NUTRITION PRODUCTS, INC.
150 Nassau St., Dept 2012, New York 7, N. Y.

Send me in plain package the 8 oz. Protam Plan for a Ten Day Free Trial, I will pay postman \$2.50 plus postage. This money will be refunded immediately, including postage, if I do not safely REDUCE to my satisfaction within 10 Days. I RISK NOTHING.

NAME
Print Plainly

ADDRESS

CITYZONESTATE

(Sorry. No Canadian Orders.)

We Pay Postage If Check or Money Order Enclosed.